TEACHING ENGLISH ON THE MOON

A MEMOIR OF TEACHING AT A RURAL SCHOOL

by

Alan David Hoffmann

A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Art

in

English

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

May 2020

DEDICATION

For Kodi, Zoey, and Abigail. Your support and love through this project has been incredible and I could not have done it without you.

For the students at staff at Savage Public School who always push me to be my best.

For rural educators everywhere.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

ABSTRACT

Montana is a primarily rural state. The majority of Montana's high schools are "Class C" schools with enrollments under 107 students. Of these, over sixty Montana high schools have enrollments under sixty students. In these schools, high school academic departments normally consist of one person. This experience is rarely examined. Even existing literature that focuses on rural education focus on settings with higher enrollments than many of Montana's smaller schools.

Drawing on the author's personal experience of teaching at high school with an enrollment of around 25 students, this memoir provides an account and guide for working in these settings. Through this, the author details the benefits of teaching in these settings, such as smaller class sizes that allow for more one-on-one interaction. It also examines the challenges of coming and teaching in rural places, including the stresses of prepping for seven different classes and difficulties of integrating into rural communities.

Given the number of these schools in the state of Montana, many graduates from the Montana University System's education programs will go on to teach in these settings. This work aims to advocate for rural settings and to give teachers that may go into these areas an idea of what to expect.

MAPS

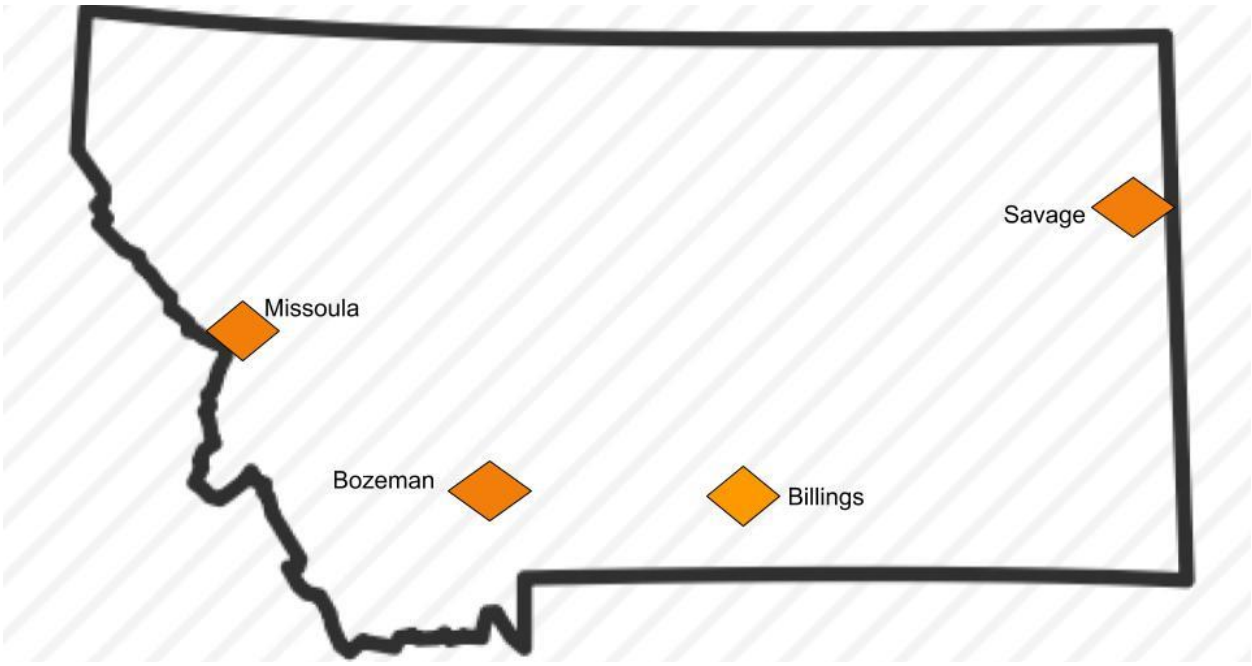

Figure 1: Location of Savage within the State of Montana

.

Figure 2: Savage Town Map

INTRODUCTION

On March 15, 2020, schools in Montana were shut down due to the Covid-19 outbreak sweeping through the United States. Though the announcement was expected, it still sent teachers across the state into a panic. How would we provide instruction to all students? How would grading work? How do we go online? How do we provide structure? All of these questions would have to be answered with varying degrees of success from school to school, possibly even teacher to teacher.

In many schools there were departments getting together. How can this school provide English instruction? What can we do to ensure our students learn science? I, on the other hand, did not have that luxury. I had no fellow English teachers who knew my students. I am a one-person English department. I wrestled with the same questions that everyone faced, though largely I would have to wrestle with them by myself.

Yes, there are a myriad of resources out there during this time. There is no shortage of teachers sharing what they are doing for their classes or providing tips for making the best of an unprecedented occasion. Ultimately though, the decisions of what to do would be mine to make alone. As I prepare to go through these uncharted territories, I worry if I will get it right for my students, if I will balance their needs for education with their emotional needs in the midst of a global pandemic. I worry about what sacrifices I will have to make to my instruction, what I will have to move to next year, and how I will have to change what I do. The questions are never ending. In a sense though, they are offshoots of questions that I have asked myself frequently over my six year teaching career.

Given when this project is due, I do not have the luxury of explaining how I navigated teaching at a rural school during the Covid-19 outbreak. When this is submitted to the Montana State University library, I suspect that we will still be in the midst of the shutdown. I mention it here at the outset of this memoir because in my six years of teaching, all of them in Savage, this event captures perfectly the challenges and fears I face on a daily basis. I often debate if I am best serving students. Am I pushing them too hard? Are they not being challenged enough? How do I balance their educational needs with what might be going on at home?

In this time, the lines between teacher and parent, professional and citizen are more blurred then ever. I worry about our situation here. I worry about the stressors teaching from home, over distance, put on myself and my wife, Kodi. I worry what will happen if and when the number of cases in Montana and Richland County climb. It may be tempting to think that we are safe because we are rural, because the chance of the virus coming here is small. And yet, it is here. It is a reminder that the rural is touched by our ever globalized society.

Teaching at a school Savage's size is an experience that is often overlooked in educational practices, discussions, and study. Educational programs are tailored to larger school districts that have more students in one classroom then I have in my entire high school. Even writers who have focused on rural education tend to be in places much larger than Savage. Garret Keizer writes about his experiences as a rural teacher in *Getting Schooled: The Reeducation of an American Teacher*. Keizer is undoubtedly in rural Vermont. His long commute is surrounded by farmlands. He writes about the

poverty common in rural areas. There is no doubt that he is in a small school setting. And yet, he has a department with English colleagues. His home county, Orleans County, is three times more populous than Richland County, Montana, where Savage is located.

There are many definitions and degrees of rurality. Even the federal government cannot settle on one definition. Depending on the department or the needs, communities of all sorts of sizes can be deemed rural. Often in my readings about rurality, towns that were mentioned had populations of 10,000 people. They had police and fire departments. They contained small four-year colleges. Yes, they were smaller than cities, but they were still much larger than Savage. Savage, and the towns like it that dot the map of Montana might be classified as "extreme rural". They have populations of less than 1,000. Schools have K-12 enrollments of between 100-300 students. Our police force is the county sheriff's department. We have a volunteer fire department. There is a community college 30 miles away that is always under threat of closure from the state. The closest four-year institution is over three hours away. As I read through rural scholarship, it becomes clear that my rural experience is very different from how others experience rurality. The rurality of Savage is not simply a scaled down city, it is an entirely new experience.

The Montana High School Association reports that 96 of its member schools had enrollments under 100 students for the 2018-19 school year. 72 schools have enrollments of 65 or lower. Savage, with its enrollment of 27 is in the middle of those enrollment

numbers. The smallest school, Judith Gap, reported an enrollment of six students.[1] In the meantime, the state's teacher colleges are preparing students to enter school districts like Bozeman, Billings, and Missoula. Part of this is how these teaching programs are structured. They rely on partnerships with larger school districts to make placements for practicum and student teaching. While there are some steps being taken to correct this, such as Montana State University's rural practicum program, by and large, pre-service teachers in the state of Montana are not adequately prepared to go into rural places, to become one-person departments, and to live in isolated towns.

It may be tempting to look at enrollment numbers of some of these low enrollment schools and assume that those teaching assignments are easy. But, while the number of students taught is small, these teachers have to prepare for six or seven different classes. They have to be class advisors and coaches. They have to serve on union bargaining committees. They have to organize fundraisers. They may have to act as guidance counselors for seniors weighing college options when the school doesn't have one. They may have to act as therapists for students in areas where mental health services are virtually non-existent. The numbers of students may be low, but the list of responsibilities is never ending.

---

[1] These numbers can be found here: https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/be07-2137059/2018-19_Spring_Enrollment_By_Size.pdf#_ga=2.83774485.2008393127.1585064486-2019060078.1581963521

I wrote this memoir primarily for pre-service teachers that are unsure of what lies in front of them when they enter into a rural space. Rural needs dedicated teachers, teachers who will join in their communities, and help educate this generation of rural students. Rural teachers should be cognizant of the space they are in, use that localized knowledge to drive instruction, thus preparing students for the 21st century skills they need, but also showing them that said skills can come back to their hometowns and be used to build them up. I hope this memoir acts as a guide for teachers who are curious about going into rural areas to teach. While I focus on the teaching of English, I believe much of my experiences are applicable to rural teachers in any subject area. I want to be frank about the challenges that I face, ranging from student and parent engagement in school to living so distant from goods and services. It is difficult to plan instruction for every student not just for one semester or one year, but from their seventh-grade year to when they will graduate as seniors. It is challenging to work in a school where the local coal mine closure plunges us into uncertainty about funding or even our future as a district.

I also want to celebrate rural places. Savage is a place where I have made my home. And while there are challenges, there are benefits. I have a great deal of academic freedom in how I teach, and it is rewarding to see students develop through the years. It is also worth celebrating what places like Savage are capable of. Our school came together to write a book. We may not have the numbers or the resources of larger schools, but we have accomplished great things.

In addition to this acting as a guide for teachers, I also hope that those looking to go into administration can learn from this book. While I do not know the ins and outs of school administration, I feel fortunate to have started my career in Savage with an excellent superintendent who was supportive of what I wanted to do, and allowed me to build up a department that was truly mine. I will explain how administration has supported me, or detail when it has not, and explain how those decisions have influenced me. Using my experiences as a guide, I'm hopeful that rural administrators can find ways to better support their teachers, especially new teachers trying to find their way in what is a challenging profession in a challenging space.

I also hope that those who study rural places, rural education, and education in general will be reminded of places like Savage. We are remote and isolated, but the teachers and students here are as worth learning from. I hope this work acts as an invitation of sorts to the academic community to come to us and help address issues such as the rural brain drain, strategies to help new teachers better integrate into communities, and perhaps most importantly, help these small communities ensure their place in an increasingly globalized society.

The first chapter discusses how I found Savage and the decisions that led me here. The second chapter details the perks and drawbacks of one of the main recruiting tools that rural schools have: teacher housing. Chapters three and four detail my first year in Savage and how I built up my program. Chapter five focuses on the community of Savage, the challenges of rural places, and the school's role in the community. Chapter six examines the role of sports in our school. In chapter seven, I detail why I continue to

teach in Savage. Chapter eight looks at professional development in rural places. The next chapter details how Savage was able to write a book as a school community. The final two chapters will serve as my final push for rural areas, with chapter ten looking at the lessons I have learned and how I feel that education as a whole may benefit from them. The final chapter is where I lay out the benefits for teachers to start their careers in rural places. Additionally, I reflect on the challenges that face the stakeholders of rural education.

Savage has been home to me, even though I never imagined coming to a community like this. I have found rural places to be a paradoxical place of benefits and drawbacks that are well worth examining. In the end though, I wrote this memoir because I believe in rural schools. I believe in rural students. I believe in rural communities. For too long, these places and people have been ignored. The results have seen schools close, communities turn into ghost towns, and students shuffled into larger schools. It is time to turn our attention to rural, to see what can be learned from it, and to help rural schools and rural communities build themselves up and help all students in the 21st Century.

CHAPTER ONE: FINDING SAVAGE

It was late November 2013 when I finally received my placement for my spring student teaching assignment. By then, most of my cohort had found placements, most in Bozeman. I had been hopeful that some contacts I had made in Belgrade or Manhattan would have yielded a placement, but no luck. I had even asked the Field Placement Office at Montana State University if they could look into Glasgow, a town on Montana's Hi-Line. I would be nearly 400 miles away from my wife, but I had family there, and it would just be a semester.

About the time I had resigned myself to a semester in Glasgow, the field placement office emailed me. They had found a spot for me, a little bit of driving would be required, but I could student teach in Harrison.

My first thought was not so much of relief, as much as it was, "Where is Harrison?" Despite being only fifty miles away from Bozeman, it was a place I had never heard of, let alone visited. One of my classmates, someone who had lived in Bozeman her entire life, had never heard of Harrison either. But, it was a placement. It didn't matter where it was, I would finish up student teaching, I would graduate, and next fall, I would

find a teaching job. All I could tell from some Internet searching was that Harrison was a Class C school.[2]

On a grey Sunday in December, my wife Kodi and I drove the fifty miles to Harrison to check out the town. As is to be expected, there isn't much to Harrison on a Sunday. The local cafe was open, so we had lunch. We walked around. Like many small towns in Montana, there was the school, a few businesses, homes and not much else. Harrison was all sequestered onto one side of the highway. It is quite possible that if you were to keep your gaze on the Tobacco Root Mountains, you would miss the town all together as you rode through it. The main thing that concerned me was driving US-287 each day. Once it crosses the Jefferson River, it quickly ascends, the road becoming a steep hill. If it got icy, there would be no way my two-wheel truck would get there. At times, the road feels tight, with hills coming right up to the road, and a cavern drop off on the other side.

I came to know the drive very well during my semester in Harrison. The English room at Harrison was on the third floor, at the very top of some very steep stairs. The room offered a glorious view of the mountains, but I wasn't there to take in the view. I

---

[2] The Montana High School Association classifies it's member schools into AA, A, B, and C classifications. Class C is any school with an enrollment of 1-107, though members that are near the cutoff mark can request to be in Class B or Class C, depending on sports participation numbers. In 2018-19 the largest Class C school was Plains with an enrollment of 134, making it larger than 10 Class B schools. For the most part, Class C schools are the smallest, most rural schools in the state.

was there to teach and learn. I learned all about Class C schools, how when winter comes, basketball dominates the discussion. I learned that these students really do notice when you show up at their ball games. I learned how to stay alive in the daily games of lightning that took place in the school gym at lunch. I learned the challenges of teaching a play to a class of four. I learned about how teacher unions operated. I learned how to teach, to become a part of a school community, to connect with students.

I loved it at Harrison. As I read the stories of my MSU classmates teaching in classes larger than Harrison High's student body population, I came to appreciate it. I was able to give one-on-one instruction to every student. I was able to get to know them, not just as students, but as people with rich lives outside of school. I loved that I taught every grade in high school, and one period might be a Shakespeare play, the next a research paper, and the next the reading of a memoir. I loved that no day was the same.

I loved the drive too. The fifty miles wasn't so bad once I got used to it. On my way to school, I thought about what I wanted to accomplish that day, what I might say to this class or that student. I felt planned and ready. On the way home, I could reflect on the day, what went right, what went wrong, and what I might do differently the next time. I know that having that time helped me become a better teacher. Reflecting is such an important part of the teaching experience, and I had a built in two hours in which to do so.

Harrison also helped me make a connection to my first teaching job. My field supervisor was Jerry Pease. In addition to coming out to Harrison a handful of times to observe me, he also taught educational leadership courses at Montana State. One of his

students, Lynne Peterson, was working towards her superintendent's license as she ran a small school in northeastern Montana. Jerry caught on that I really enjoyed teaching at a small school, and that it seemed to fit me. He knew that Lynne would be needing an English teacher, and he encouraged me to apply for the position.

I met Lynne at the rural job fair that was held at MSU a few weeks before the semester ended. Administrators from all over the state gathered on campus to find prospective teachers. While most flocked to a table set up by the Bozeman School District, I went and found the fairly nondescript Savage table. Other schools had massive displays, table banners, glossy handouts, and even swag to give away to new teachers. Savage had a pamphlet, printed on regular paper, that had pretty much the information that I had already gleaned from the Internet. However, Savage had one thing that the other schools didn't: autonomy.

From the get-go, Lynne made it clear that, if I were hired, I would be in charge of my room. She wouldn't mandate much and would trust me to make decisions. I would be my own department. Given my experiences in Harrison, this didn't scare me away. I knew what to expect. In chatting with Lynne through the day, and again at a reception held on campus that evening, I became more and more convinced that Savage was the place to be. Shortly after the job fair, I applied to Savage's English opening. It wasn't long until Lynne reached out and asked when I would want to Skype in for an interview.

Given Montana's size, and the fact that oftentimes rural schools look for teachers from all over the country, it isn't uncommon for job interviews to be completed over Skype. I've sat in on a few such interviews, and while I see the appeal, I wanted to

experience Savage first hand. I told Lynne that I could interview in person. She was surprised. It's nearly 400 miles from Bozeman to Savage, but I felt it would be worth it. I wanted to see the school, the community. I wanted to try and envision myself there to the best of my ability.

In early May, I set off for Savage. As claustrophobic as the drive to Harrison could feel at times, this was the opposite. Once over Bozeman Pass and through the Crazy Mountains, the wide-open space that Montana always feels like it is swallowing me. There are times I could not see a single man-made structure along the route. It is easy to look at a mesa on the other side of the Yellowstone River, and wonder how much it has changed, if at all, since Lewis and Clark came through the area. The Yellowstone would act as a guide of sorts. It meets I-90 at Livingston, and from there I would follow it. Rarely is the Yellowstone hidden away from the Interstate, giving a dash of blue to the landscape. Even when exiting the Interstate, to get onto Montana-16, the river still follows the course, northward to its confluence with the Missouri.. Looking out of the passenger side of my pick-up, I could see my constant companion of the last 300-plus miles. Finally, after cresting a hill nearly 25 miles north of Glendive does Savage come into view. Other than a few homes that dot the landscape, Savage is the first sign of civilization since Glendive, and the thing that stood out with the first inkling of twilight in the sky was the cell phone tower, with its blinking red light.

Savage is not a large community. There is a sign as you enter that jokingly states, "Savage: Next Six Exits". The community is surrounded on three sides by farmland. Much like Harrison, it is on one side of the highway. Much like Harrison, there are a few

stores, some homes, the school, and not much more. I found my way to the school, a large white building on Mesa Street.

I interviewed with the entire school board. This was the way that Savage preferred to do it then. I had been on one other teaching interview before, in Cody, Wyoming. That was also a room full of people, but most were educators. For some reason, I had felt more at ease there. I felt like I could speak the language of education. In front of the board, it was a slightly different audience. I didn't know if they would follow me when I talked about my educational philosophy, how I wanted to incorporate more silent sustained reading, or how I would handle classroom management issues. No matter, I would answer to the best of my ability. I looked around the room and see how my answers landed. Often, I could not tell. The Savage School Board all had excellent poker faces.

I meant to explore the town a bit after my interview. I was spending the night in Glendive, just thirty miles to the South, so I had time. But, in trying to think about how the interview had gone, I forgot about those plans. Lynne walked me to my pick-up and said they'd make a decision next week. We shook hands, and I simply drove back to Glendive. The entire time, I tried to decide if the interview had gone well or not. I felt my answers were good but couldn't tell of the reactions. In contrast, my interview in Cody had gone well. I walked away feeling great about my answers, about the rapport I had made with the interviewers. In the end, I did not get that job. What were the chances that I would get the job when I could not even tell how the interview went?

Fairly high, it would seem. It was just a few days later when Lynne called me to offer the position. The board, behind their stony faces, were impressed with my

interview. I told Lynne that I would think about it and get back to her. She wanted an answer by the end of the week. This normally may not have been an issue, but I had another job interview, this time at Dawson County High School in Glendive. Kodi had already signed on to be their middle school librarian. One of the challenges that Kodi and I faced was trying to find jobs close together in a state where towns are placed far apart. Both working in Glendive would have been a good fit, and I was mentally preparing to make the cross-state trek once again for another interview.

I called everyone I knew to ask for advice: friends, family, classmates. Most were excited about the job offer. But what, I countered, to do about the interview? What if Glendive turned out to be a good place for me? And what if I lose out on Savage by waiting until after my interview there?

It was my sister, Pam, who put it into perspective for me.

"How much say would you have over what you do in Savage?" she asked.

"I'd be my own department," I responded. "So, a lot."

"Do you think you would get that in Glendive?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. It's a bigger school."

"Well, you've never liked being told what to do, so why don't you go where you can be your own department and do your own thing?"

Of all the phone calls I made that evening, that one still resonates with me years later. I felt like I knew that Savage was the place for me. I wanted to sleep on it, and I woke up the next day still feeling like I wanted to be my own department. I called Lynne that day, told her I wanted to be her English teacher.

I was relieved. I had a job. There would be no sending out resumes and hoping for a call-back. There would be no more interviews. Kodi and I would be working near one another, in places that felt like good fits. She would have her own library; I would have my own department. With our job search completed in May, there was now time to plan and prepare for our move and for our new jobs.

CHAPTER TWO: TEACHER HOUSING

In August, Kodi and I pulled up to our new home in Savage: a single-wide trailer two blocks away from the school. The trailer, as Lynne had told us, was new. The school had recently bought two trailers, the other sat on the other side of the lot from ours. A few large trees provided some shade on the eastern side of our trailer. Inside, it was fairly nice, with a good-sized kitchen, three bedrooms, and two bathrooms. For Kodi and I, it would do well.

At least when it was hooked up to electricity. And plumbing. And had TV and Internet.

As far as first impressions go, our new home was somewhat of a mixed bag. But, still for $500 per month, especially in the Bakken, we would take it. The cost of living in northeast Montana is fairly high, thanks to the oil industry. The Bakken Oil Boom had created a huge influx of workers, hoping to strike it rich, or make money to send home to families elsewhere. Oil companies would rent out entire hotels in order to house workers. So-called man camps, really cheap trailer parks, sprung up around Williston and in the surrounding areas. People who owned houses could sell them for marked-up prices. In February 2014, *Time* reported that Williston, North Dakota had the highest apartment

rental prices in the country. A 700-square foot, one-bedroom apartment in Williston would run $2,394 per month, over $800 more per month than in New York.[3]

While prices around Sidney or Glendive were never that high, they still were often significantly higher than $500. Being two teachers, we gladly accepted the teacher housing, even if it meant that we had to give our cat, Cagney, to my parents. Cagney had been with us for our three years in Bozeman, but no pets were allowed in teacher housing.

As evidenced by the stairs leading to the front door marked "TEMPORARY", the homes were newly delivered. I believe they came to Savage sometime after my interview in May. As a result, there were no services hooked up to them. And so, on a hot August day, we unloaded the cars and moving truck. We carted boxes and furniture into the trailer that had no electricity to run the air conditioning unit. We had no water to drink to stay hydrated.[4] As the temperature outside climbed higher and higher, the conditions inside did likewise. There was no relief from the heat. Shirts stuck to clothes, dirt stuck to sweat. We were a grimy, stinky mess.

There were two saving graces that day. One was that the county fair was going on, so no one dropped by to get their first look at the new English teacher while I was in

---

[3] The article notes that Williston saw a 200% increase in homelessness, a daunting prospect in a place where winters can get as cold as -40 degrees.

[4] Granted, all Savage homes have a well, and that water is high in iron content, so we probably wouldn't have drunk it anyway. All homes have a filter. We eventually purchased a water cooler system and use that for most of our water needs.

such a state. The other was that Kodi's family lives in Froid, 70 miles north. After returning the truck to Glendive, Kodi and I made the trip up north to shower, cool off, and rest up for the settling in process. Both of us had a bit of a feeling of "What did we get ourselves into?" The trailers were advertised as being move-in ready. Which was technically accurate. We moved into them. But, they weren't livable and school was less than three weeks away.

The next day, the electricity was hooked up. It would take a few days for the water to be hooked up. During this time, Kodi stayed in Froid, while I more or less camped out in the trailer. I would shower at the school, and then spend time there decorating my classroom and trying to decide what sorts of things to teach. The enormity of being a one-person department was dawning on me. My predecessor left me a letter, in which he described the students as, "the usual bunch." Other than an offer of help if I needed it, he gave little advice on how to balance reading and writing, how to engage my students, or how to fit into the community. I perused the textbooks, searched the Internet for ideas, made plans, disregarded them, and then went home to my waterless place.

It took a few days for the water to be hooked up. It would be months until TV and Internet were hooked up as well. During this time, we were more or less cut-off from the outside world. Shortly before school started, the riots in Ferguson, Missouri broke out. Desperate for information, I used up data on my smartphone, trying to refresh Twitter, trying to load news apps, trying to figure out what was going on. I wondered how I could bring this up with my students. Language arts can be used as a vehicle to reach understanding of other people, of situations that we may never encounter. I knew my

students would be predominately white. I wondered how much they thought, if at all, of police brutality. I also wondered how much I should delve into it, being a first-year teacher. When the school year did start, I talked about it some with my students, but largely they were unaware of the event, or didn't think it mattered to them. They, that had access to all the information on the subject they could want, seemed to tune out the state of Missouri tearing itself apart. It was something that happened far away, disconnected from their lives, no matter how hard I and the school's history teacher tried to bring it into the classroom.

Our isolation aside, Kodi and I turned our attention to making the place a home. We decided on how to arrange our furniture, then rearranged it. We set up our kitchen. We made meal plans. To pass the time, we talked and played cards. When we ran out of things to say, we made our way through our DVD collections. We made it work, but were much relieved when finally, we were connected again to the world in late September.

The reason why it took so long to hook up the Internet, much like it took so long to bring the house electricity and water, was that the Bakken region suffers from a lack of workers. The energy sector is well-supplied with workers. But, electricians and technicians are hard to come by. Many that might work those jobs find better wages in the oil fields. During the height of the oil boom, heating and plumbing issues could take days to get resolved. Those that did provide electrical services or communication services

found themselves spread thin, trying desperately to keep up with the demand that the sudden influx of oil field workers has thrust upon them.[5]

Once things were fully connected, our home officially on the grid as it were, we settled into our routines. One of the biggest differences that we found moving from Bozeman to Savage was the lack of a grocery store. Valley Fuel, the convenience store in town, had some staples like milk and eggs, but usually at higher prices. And so, we would make the trek each week, either to Sidney 20 miles to the north or to Glendive 30 miles to the south, in search of groceries. Sometimes we would drive the 90 minutes to Williston to shop at Wal-Mart or other clothing stores. The days of stopping by the grocery store on our way home from work or school were done.

We lived in that trailer on Canal Street for three years. In my third year of teaching, Kodi and I announced that we were expecting our first child. Soon after the announcement, Ms. Peterson told us that we could move into the McNeil House. A former superintendent in Savage had owned the house, and upon retiring, had sold it to the school. It had five bedrooms, a livable basement, a fenced in backyard, and was an actual house, not a trailer. Kodi and I were excited for the move and the extra space. It would still be teacher housing, but it would be an improvement, especially given the baby on the way.

---

[5] This can best be exemplified by the Sidney McDonald's which would place a sign in their windows to indicate times when they were drive-thru only. If they couldn't get enough workers on a shift, they would close off the restaurant to dine-in customers.

So it was much to my surprise that in March of that year, when attending a school board meeting, I heard Ms. Peterson tell the board, “And as you know, I’ll be moving into the McNeil House.” I was blindsided by the announcement, as we faced the prospect of carving out room for the baby in our small home. Ms. Peterson did talk to me the next day, explaining that she didn’t want to live with her father anymore, and wanted a place of her own. While understandable, it didn’t change the fact that it upset our plans. I felt betrayed by this, to the extent that I looked around at other teaching jobs.

Teacher housing is a double-edged sword for schools. It does provide school districts with a carrot to offer to teachers. Especially in places where living expenses are high, teacher housing is an affordable option. This can be beneficial for new teachers, who are on the lower end of pay scales. What schools don’t recognize though, is that because it is a rental agreement, teacher housing acts as a barrier to being fully in the community. I can, at any time, announce that I’m leaving, and be gone from my home and Savage in a month. There is no putting a house on the market, no filling out the end of a lease. While teacher housing has provided a place for my family to live, it has only made me a temporary resident of the town. I cannot establish the roots that I might have were I to buy a house.

This is not simply a rural issue. School districts around the country are beginning to struggle with the issue of where teachers can live. Especially in places like Silicon Valley, where the cost of living has skyrocketed in recent years, it is a valid concern. The San Francisco Chronicle reported on the issue in 2016, noting that many teachers in the San Francisco Unified School District are priced out of homes in the region. They quote

one teacher, Rebecca Sheehan-Stross as saying, “This is not sustainable. We can’t live like this forever. We want to be starting families and living like adults.” The SFUSD has proposed offering teacher housing as a way to fix that problem, but has made no moves on that front.

However, it isn’t clear if such action will make a difference. The research about the impact on teacher housing on recruitment and retention is either nonexistent or tenuous at best. Liana Loewus writed for EdWeek that, “Nearly 55 percent of former teachers who said they would consider returning to the classroom said housing incentives would be “not at all important” in influencing their decision.” As Michael Hickey, the president of United Teachers of Santa Clara tells Loewus, “Ultimately, if teachers were paid adequately for the value they give society, we wouldn’t have to have programs to subsidize their housing.” While districts that utilize teacher housing make the claim that it works as a tool for recruitment and retention, the research does not bear that out. The Santa Clara school district in California built a housing complex for teachers, claims that it works for teachers, but admits that it does not track data on residents. Without this data, we still can’t know if teacher housing is the solution that school districts large and small are looking for.

This doesn’t stop districts from using it as policy. In Montana, the Big Sky School District announced in 2019 that it had secured funding to build a total of six two-bedroom units. Rent would be 30% of the teacher’s salary. According to district employee surveys, many teachers leave the district because of the lack of affordable housing. Housing,

especially in rural areas where the cost of living is high, is a problem. However, I remain skeptical that simply providing housing is the catch-all that districts believe it to be.

In my own experience, I could watch the house across from mine on Canal Street to see how teacher housing didn't necessarily mean retention. In the three years I lived there, four different teachers lived there. A music teacher, a PE teacher, and two different elementary teachers. In all, since it was purchased by the district, seven families have called that trailer home. Only one of them remains in the district. Each year, when Kodi and I discuss whether or not we want to return, the fact that we have teacher housing doesn't enter into the equation. It is not affordable housing that keeps us here, but the lack of permanence that we feel in the community, even after six years of being here, may be a factor when we decide to leave. I cannot say definitively that raising teacher pay and giving teachers a reasonable chance at owning a home in this region is the answer, though perhaps it is time that school districts, large and small, adopt such a strategy in their recruitment and retention efforts.

In the end, Kodi and I were able to move into a slightly larger home. The school's math teacher left, opening up his double-wide trailer home to us. It is still teacher housing, and while it is bigger, still has the same number of bedrooms and bathrooms as our first place on Canal Street. We moved in only two weeks before Zoey was born. Just over two years later, our second daughter, Abigail came into our lives. Kodi and I both seek a place of permanence, a place to truly call our own. But, the few houses in the area that have come on the market are typically listed at over $200,000. We remain priced out, we remain in teacher housing, we remain untethered from the community.

CHAPTER THREE: STARTING OUT

Teaching is a unique job. You spend years training for it. You take classes in methods, you go through student teaching, you go through interviews in order to become a teacher. But, until you actually sit behind your desk in your classroom, preparing to teach your curriculum, it doesn't feel real. Of course, there is practicum and student teaching, but until you are the one in that room, by yourself, it simply isn't the real thing.

This is a matter of pressure. There's a lot of pressure on teachers. We are supposed to ensure that our students are "college and career ready" via the Common Core. While No Child Left Behind is no longer the law of the land, the echoes of Adequate Yearly Progress can still be heard. The world of education has become one of high stakes, with teachers in the middle of it.

This pressure is amplified when you are the department.

In the lead-up to the first day of school, I tried to make a plan of sorts. In college, there was talk of curriculum mapping and planning the year, but I figured that would be too ambitious. Maybe in future years, I could do that.[6] For year one, I would have to settle for something smaller. Like, a semester? A quarter? A unit? It turned out it was a week.

---

[6] As of year six, this has never happened. Planning has gotten easier, but I still only plan a little at a time.

I went into the opening PIR days of school with only the vaguest of notions of what I wanted my students to accomplish in the year, and it wasn't until a few days before students came back to school that I knew what I would do on my first day. Wanting to strike a tone for expectations, I decided that my classes would go to the library on the first day back.

When I was a pre-service teacher, the book *Readicide* had a profound impact on how I wanted to teach. After reading the analysis of how American schools were killing a love of reading, I was determined to make things different for my students. I would require my students to read two books, of their own choosing, per semester. Instead of a book report or major project, they would simply give a book talk on what they had read. They would tell their class what they had read, give a brief synopsis of it, read a select passage from the book, and then say whether or not they liked the book. I didn't want to prescribe reading to them. I wanted them to discover books all on their own, to find a genre or author they enjoyed. I knew that student choice would be a huge component. So, on the first day of class, after a brief introduction of who I was and going over the syllabus quickly, I took all my students to the library where they checked out a book and read.

I set the tone for myself as well. I read along with them. I brought in *The Book Thief* and as my students settled into the chairs and bean bags with their books, I settled in with mine. I wanted the students to know that I wouldn't expect anything of them that I wouldn't do myself, and that included reading.

The kids responded well to it. There were few disruptions. Everyone checked out a book. The librarian said that she had never had so many books checked out before. Ms. Peterson said that she saw boys carrying books around that she had never seen read before.

I remember little from that first day, except that I started the day with Freshmen English. I found the class to be a lively bunch with great attitudes from the get-go. They were excited about the prospect of being in high school. Even though they would have many of the same teachers from their eighth grade year, even though they had been in the same building as the high school as long as they had been in Savage, they were still eager to be in high school. This was summed up by one of the boys telling me that his motto for the year was, “Strive for greatness. Everyday!”

With that in mind, we headed to the library.

Throughout my first year there, the freshmen class was one of my favorites. Several of them began to carry books around with them all the time. When one gave a book talk, it was common for it to be picked up by another person in the class. This was especially true with the girls. Books like *Elanor and Park* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were passed around, read, discussed, and compared. It was a class that routinely rose to new challenges. They took on writing assignments with gusto, diving into creative and academic writing projects alike. They had lively discussions when we went over books such as *Animal Farm* or *13 Reasons Why*. Oftentimes, that was the class that could keep me going during the rough times of my first year.

It was somewhat ironic that in a few ways, that freshmen class was more mature than my first group of seniors. Before I took the reigns of the English department, I had heard stories of this class and their clashes with my predecessor. I heard how Mr. Clappsaddle had thrown a clock at one of them. I heard how he broke his wrist after banging his hand on the podium while angry at them. I heard how he pushed one of them against a wall in anger. In my mind, he took the form of a teacher who had stopped caring for the kids, had stopped looking out for them. He was the one that could only refer to them as, "the usual bunch," in his letter to me, after all.

While I could never excuse that sort of behavior in a teacher, the seniors did often frustrate me. This can best be exemplified by the Gatorade Incident.

We were reading *Beowulf,* mostly because at that time, I was using the textbook as my lifeline. I was doing an unconvincing job of getting them invested in it. The tricks of language, the symbolism, the hero's journey, all the things that had fascinated me in my Medieval Literature Course were no contest against the very early onset of senioritis. Still, we plunged through, until there was a ruckus from a few of the desks to my left.

It was there that the three class troublemakers sat. Two of them were fighting over a candy bar. There was a slap, and Daryl's head snapped back.[7] Blood spurted from his nose.

---

[7] Student names have been changed.

“Daryl! Brad! To the office! Now!” I rarely raised my voice, so it startled them. The two of them ambled out of my room, and while I wasn’t entirely sure of what happened, I knew I couldn't deal with those two anymore. A few minutes later, Ms. Peterson came up to my room with the two offenders in tow.

“So, what was that all about?” I asked impatiently.

“I wanted his Snickers...” Brad said, almost sheepishly.

“It was mine,” Daryl retorted.

“But then you spit into my Gatorade,” Brad countered.

“Over a candy bar? You gave him a bloody nose over a candy bar?”

“No, I gave him a bloody nose because he spit in my Gatorade.”

“But, this whole thing started out over a candy bar. You’re seniors! Seniors! You shouldn’t be doing this sort of thing, it is way beyond time to grow up. There are third graders in this school who I’m sure know about sharing and personal property better than you. And no spitting in a Gatorade is not acceptable,” I said cutting off an attempted rebuttal, “but neither is slapping someone and giving them a bloody nose. Again, seniors! Come on. Set a good example for everyone. You should be more mature about these sorts of things.”

Ms. Peterson just stood by and let me rant at them. It was probably the first time anyone in the school had seen me angry. “You,” I said to Brad, “will spend thirty minutes with me after school.”

“But what about...?”

“He got a bloody nose, I think he’s suffered enough. Any questions?”

There were none. I had thought later that I should ask Ms. Peterson if I had handled that acceptably, but figured that her silence on the matter was proof enough that she thought I had handled it well. It was one of many ways that she allowed me to become my teacher self in that first year. Her way of supporting me was to have me figure things out for my own. Often, I would go to her with a question about how to handle a student not turning in work, a discipline issue, or some other matter. She always said, "Whatever you think is best, you should do." As a first year teacher, this was frustrating. I wanted help, support, answers. But, looking back, I realize that this was her way of building confidence in me. She trusted me to handle things well, with the students' interests at heart. She wanted me to trust myself as much as she did.

A 2012 article on "Educational Leadership" posits that beginning teachers especially struggle in three areas: classroom management, being burdened by curricular freedom, and sinking in unsupportive environments. I did struggle with the first two at times in my first year, but one of the major reasons why I made it through my first year, and why I have ultimately found the decision to come back to Savage year after year fairly easy, is because I've felt supported by administration. I haven't been pressured to teach to a test. My preferred method of teaching out of novels and not textbooks has been fine. When I want classroom sets of things, they are ordered. When I want to teach different electives, they get approved. I have had support to do what I want to do in my classroom.

This support is what allowed me to find my footing with the other aspects of teaching that new teachers often struggle with. Especially with classroom management. I

will say, for a new teacher, a small school is the best place one can go to avoid behavioral issues. This isn't to say that they are non-existent, but small schools give the best environment to build relationships with your students. Relationships are key to everything in teaching. As Education Week reported in 2019,

> "A Review of Educational Research analysis of 46 studies found that strong teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short- and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students' individual, family, and school backgrounds.

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Southern California is quoted in the article saying, "A lot of teachers ... have really strong abilities to engage socially with the students, but then it's not enough. You have to go much deeper than that and actually start to engage with students around their curiosity, their interests, their habits of mind through understanding and approaching material to really be an effective teacher." In larger schools, where there are twenty or more students in your class, this can be hard to accomplish. But, in a school like Savage, where class sizes average around seven students, it is easier. You can notice what a student writes about. You can take the time to ask about interests, and ask questions about those interests. You get to know what will motivate them and what won't.

Of course, relationships take time to develop. This gives rural schools another advantage. I have taught some students for all six years that I have been in Savage. My relationships with this year's senior class has been created and cemented over countless

hours of reading, writing, and discussing together. It's somewhat amazing to think that it started with them as seventh graders. They were a class of four then (now a class of five, though only two of them have been with me all six years). This year's seniors know the routine of my classroom, the expectations. I have no discipline issues with them. The seniors my first year got into fights over candy bars.

While these relationships were developing though, I knew I had the backing of Ms. Peterson. I could maintain my laid-back style, focus on relationships, and when students did act up, I could deal with them. This isn't to say I was easy on them or let anything go in my classroom. When the year ended, Ms. Peterson laughed at the fact that I was the first teacher to give out a detention that year, to an 8th grader who would not stop interrupting me while I tried to help one of his classmates.

Though I was laid back, that first year saw plenty of students pushing boundaries. I would stomp my foot to get class's attention, raise my voice at times, make ultimatums with students. This would happen especially with my eighth-grade class. They were my last class of the day, where I was exhausted, and they were ready to be done. It was the only class where I ever threatened an all-class detention over constant disruptions. I regretted the words as soon as I said them and hoped that the class wouldn't test their luck with it. In that instance, I knew I was breaking student trust, especially with those that had done nothing wrong. Luckily, we had time to repair that relationship, and in the coming years, that class became one of my favorites.

Classroom management is something that every teacher struggles with. On our staff, as small as we are, there are different approaches to it. There are strict

disciplinarians who are quick with detentions. There are yellers. There are some who haven't quite mastered it. There are the laid-back ones. There is no one approach to it. I was fortunate enough to have administrative backing while I found the approach that worked best for me. I am also fortunate enough to be in a place where I can develop relationships with my students, to fully see them as individuals who have lives outside of school. Those relationships have made all the difference.

The other major issue that first year teachers struggle with is "the burden of curriculum freedom." I feel like this is evident in English more than in any other subject. In history, pick a year and a region and go from there. Math and science typically start at the beginning of a textbook and go forward. For English though, everything that has ever been written is at your disposal. Do with it as you will. Greek tragedies? Shakespearean comedies? Puritan sermons? Newer works such as *The Hate U Give*? Presidential speeches? The canon? All fair game.

It is a daunting task and one that for me cannot be broken up amongst other teachers in the department. It was on me and me alone to provide a good, well-rounded English education. The number one thing that keeps me awake at night, even into year seven, is the question of if I am doing right by my students, if I am fulfilling my obligation to them.

In my first year, this was particularly daunting. I ended up falling back on textbooks in my first year a lot. I did not really like to for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the *Elements of Literature* books that are still in my classroom were published in 1993. And while stories stay the same, I often found the questions in them lacking in depth. Despite that, given that I was drowning in the need to plan, I used them more often than not.

This is how I found myself teaching *Macbeth* even though I had never read it.

If you find yourself needing to teach something you haven't read, here are some pointers. First, be confident. It is likely that the students assume that you have read it. The students assume you have read everything. You are an English teacher, after all. Unless you tell them that you haven't read it, they will not know. Secondly, do not tell them that you have never read the text.[8] You've just ceded your authority on the subject away. Plus, it damages your reputation as someone who has read everything. Thirdly, stay ahead of them. You haven't read this particular book or play, but you've read lots. Stay a chapter or act ahead, maybe do some research on themes and motifs. This allows you to sound somewhat intelligent as you go through this teaching experience.

This last point was one that I ignored as I plowed into *Macbeth*. I remember one student, as we divvied up roles, volunteering to be Macduff. Something about the way he

---

[8] I did tell my sophomores that I was reading *Lord of the Flies* for the first time with them, but told them I would show them what I was marking and what I was seeing as I read it. Unless you are planning on using it as a teachable moment though, just keep this information to yourself.

said, made me think he was joking. In my head, I felt like he was making fun of all the "Mac" names, and was adding on Duff, like Duff Man from "The Simpsons".

"There is no Macduff," I said.

"Yes there is," he said, as my eyes flicked across the character's name.

"Ah...right. I forgot he was in this scene." Not likely the best cover, but it worked for the time being. At least I didn't get called out for it.

After we finished *Macbeth*, I decided that by and large, I was done with British Literature. It was hard for the students to get into it. I myself have wondered about the purpose of presenting it as the highest level of literature to American students. I didn't think my students were getting much value out of it, and I certainly didn't enjoy teaching it. I thought about what I wanted seniors to learn in their final year of high school. I wanted them to be exposed to more diversity, read books about preparing for a life outside of school. For me, *Beowulf* was not what they needed. One of the books I eventually brought into the senior curriculum was *Brave New World*. As I explained to some of my colleagues during my sixth year of teaching, "The themes in it, about individualism, and how it all fits into society, is really fascinating. It leads to great discussions. It's one of my favorite books to teach!"

"You say that about every book you teach," countered the sixth-grade teacher.

"Perks of being my own department," I added as the bell rang, sending me back into another class.

Being my own department was what brought me to Savage initially. I have the final say in what books to teach. If I want to teach *Romeo and Juliet* one year to

Freshmen, and then *Julius Caesar* the next, I can. If I don't feel like teaching *The Scarlet Letter* anymore, I can drop it. If I want to start teaching graphic novels, I can. If I feel that one year, the sophomore class would benefit from a traditional research paper, I can teach it to them. If I think a multi-genre project would suit the next year of sophomores better, I can do that. It takes a lot of time, planning, reflection, revising, and reworking to get to that level. This is one of the challenges of teaching, but also what makes it rewarding. No day is the same, no year is the same.

This is the level of freedom that I had wanted when I took the job. I didn't have to teach things that I didn't like. I could teach things that I was enthusiastic about, that I could better connect to their lives. As I learned that first year, students won't be excited about a book if it is clear that their teacher is feigning his excitement about teaching it.

The level of curricular freedom also helped me to address some of the glaring holes in my students' abilities, namely writing. During my first year, I partnered with a Teaching Writing course at Montana State. The idea of the partnership was for my students to get an extra level of feedback on their work, while the pre-service teachers would get a look at actual student writing and see the impact of their feedback. While I thought this would be beneficial to all involved, I was scared for my students. Mr. Clappsaddle had never focused on writing and it showed. There was a lack of critical thinking in my students' work. One MSU student even commented to me, "Is this really where they're at?"

It was one of the biggest lessons of being a first-year teacher. You inherit what you inherit. I inherited weak writers, students who were not used to thinking critically

about their answers, students that didn't know what a thesis was. Without needing to adhere to a strict curriculum though, I was able to focus on writing, allowing students adequate time to respond to feedback, to polish their writing. No, I did not make up all of their lost ground in one year. But I was able to chip away at it, and to help my students become more well-rounded writers.

The main thing that I remember from my first year is not necessarily an individual unit or lesson, but rather the feeling of exhaustion. Prepping for seven classes still remains the biggest challenge that I face as a teacher in Savage. Each day can still feel like a struggle. With my seven different classes, I found myself bouncing between topics, from themes in *the Giver* to research papers, to poetry, to creative writing, all in the course of a day. I often stayed at the school until 5:00 or later, trying to design lessons and units that would resonate with students. Most days, I would go home unsure if I had accomplished that goal, unsure if I was serving the students well.

However, I knew that I had the support of Ms. Peterson. Without that, my feeling of drowning might have swept me away from Savage. With it though, I have stayed, even years after she has left. She allowed me to make my department my own, for me to influence the academic culture of the school. She allowed me the freedom that I needed to become my own kind of teacher.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEVELOPING A PROGRAM

Often in my first few years in Savage, I would lie awake and ask myself if I was giving my students the best English education possible. I felt like I was doing my best, but I still would wonder, "What if I'm wrong?" I have autonomy to teach what I want and how I want, but without having someone in the building to talk with about English, I can only try my best.

Having this level of control is liberating and rare. Teacher autonomy is on the decline. But it is essential to the makings of a good school. As Finnish educator and researcher Pasi Sahlberg writes, "Teachers need greater collective professional autonomy and more support to work with one another. In other words, more freedom from bureaucracy, but less from one another." It is the last part of Sahlberg's quote that gives me pause as I reflect on this level of autonomy that I have had. Teachers must work together, they must collaborate.

A one-person department is an excellent place to put into practice the educational philosophy that teacher training courses have you come up with. I knew I wanted to incorporate a great deal of silent sustained reading in my classes. I knew I wanted to foster a connection between my high school classes and the elementary, taking advantage of being in the same building. I wanted to drop textbooks and focus more on books. I wanted students to write. With no department mandate and Ms. Peterson being hands-off in my decision making, I had free rein to explore this philosophy, to test it out. But, with no other English teachers to base it off of, how would I know if the students were

learning? Would they be, in the words of the Common Core State Standards, “College and career ready”?

It’s an on-going question. Different students have different needs. Each class will respond to certain assignments better than others. There is no correct, or sure-fire approach to ensure that this is happening. I can only try my best to make sure that each student is improving, that they are acquiring the skills needed. And while the Common Core is our standard for what those skills should be, those standards are fairly vague and repetitive if you teach grades 7-12. The following chart has a list of standards from various grade levels to illustrate.

Standard	7th Grade	9th-10th	11th-12th
Writing Standard 4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Reading Informational Texts 5	Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas.	Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).	Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
Reading Literature 3	Analyze how particular elements of	Analyze how complex characters	Analyze the impact of the author's choices

	a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).	(e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.	regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
Speaking and Listening 6	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Table 1 Select Common Core Standards expressed from different grade levels

Some of the standards do not change from the time a student is a 7th grader to when they are a senior preparing to graduate. Others maybe shift focus as the years progress, but the standards are written vaguely. Most often, English teachers can claim that most any activity meets several standards. I doubt this is what the authors of the Common Core State Standards had in mind. Most of the reading literature standards have a provision that by the end of the grade level, they should be reading grade appropriate texts, but there is little guidance in what that means. While it can be maddening to figure out, it does also allow me some leeway. I've taught *A Christmas Carol* to junior high students, feeling that enough of them are familiar enough with the classic tale that they can make their way through it with guidance. I also assigned the same text to my AP

Literature class with less scaffolding, allowing them to parse through the text on their own.

One of the first classroom sets that I purchased is an excellent example of how reading levels can be deceiving in trying to determine what grade level a book should be taught. Reading levels can give you some indication of where books should go, but not always. Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why* was one of the first classroom sets I ever bought. The school guidance counselor gave me the book and said she thought every high schooler should read it. I read it over a weekend and agreed that it's anti-bullying, suicide awareness message was important. I taught it to my Freshman classes for several years. Students did connect with the book, but after a few years of teaching it, I found it to be too simple. Accelerated Reader rates the book at roughly a 4th grade reading level. For that and other reasons, chief among them that I was bored teaching it and that I thought it swerved closely to using suicide as a revenge tactic, I switched *13 Reasons Why* to *Backlash* by Sarah Darer Littman. *Backlash* is about a grade level higher than *13 Reasons Why*, still placing it well below Freshmen reading level. However, the book features a good message about the benefits of seeking mental health services and touches on cyberbullying, two aspects that *13 Reasons Why* does not contain. *Backlash* is also a book that I believe I could teach to my junior high classes. While it is set in a high school, it does not have plots of sexual assault or drug and alcohol abuse. *13 Reasons Why* did, and I felt that even with the low reading level, it was better suited for a high school class.

I have tried in my teaching career to mix in a decent amount of what might be considered the canon with newer materials. For example, my juniors read *Of Mice and*

Men, but I also give them Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Steinbeck, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Shakespeare and the rest all have a place on my shelves and in my classroom, but I also want to find ways to bring in newer voices.

This is not always easy. I must also teach writing. If I were a dedicated literature teacher, I would bring in books like Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, a novel centered around the police slaying of an unarmed black teen. I would teach Benjamin Alrie Saenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* which features two LGBTQ latinx characters. I might even teach *The Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin, which is narrated by a gender fluid teenager. These voices are important to our culture and I would love for my students to explore them as classes. But I have time constraints. I must teach literature, but also writing and public speaking. That balancing act is hard enough. I also teach in a very conservative area. I have not pushed the envelope with my requisitions, partly to avoid the politics that can surround controversial books. So, I must give these books and these voices to my students subversively.

In the previous chapter, I talked about book talks, the low stakes way in which my students can get credit for reading. If a student completes all their book talks, they will read eight books on their own in a school year, or roughly one per month. I also keep a well-stocked classroom library that is full of books from diverse authors and ranges on a number of topics. I also talk about books that I read. For instance, when I read *Symptoms of Being Human*, I gave my own book talk on it, and explained what the book was about. Sure enough, a student grabbed my copy a week later and read it on her own. When

police brutality comes up in class, I can point to *The Hate U Give* and undoubtedly, some student will grab it, read it, and see the issue from a viewpoint vastly different from their own. I don't know if this is a perfect solution to bringing in diverse authors into my classroom, and I certainly could do more to teach these types of books, but it is a start.

One might reasonably ask if this works. I am aware that students can cheat on book talks.[9] But, I do also believe strongly in giving students access to books and chances to read. When Savage was on a five-day week, I would have students read on Fridays. Now that we are at a four-day week, I can't give over one day per week for reading, but I still try to find time for them to read independently. I could tell, even from year one to year two that students became more confident readers. In my second year of teaching, a junior confesses, "I used to hate reading, but now I like it."

I also found proof in my third year when my sophomores took their standardized tests. I do not put much stake in said tests. I feel like they are high stakes tests that don't actually measure much of anything. But, sometimes the data does yield some insights, such as when it showed me the growth of one student in particular. The sophomore boy was a reluctant reader. When he came into high school, he joined my Western Literature elective because there were no other options and he liked Louis L'Amour. He enjoyed the class and wound up taking science fiction literature the next year. On top of that, he was

---

[9] The requirement that they read a selection of the book and explain why it was important is the main guard against them trying to pass off a book they didn't read. I have caught some students trying to do this. It still isn't a perfect system, but it does encourage students to read.

completing his book talks and doing the assigned readings in general English, reading about 15 books per school year and it showed on his test scores, as seen in the graph below.

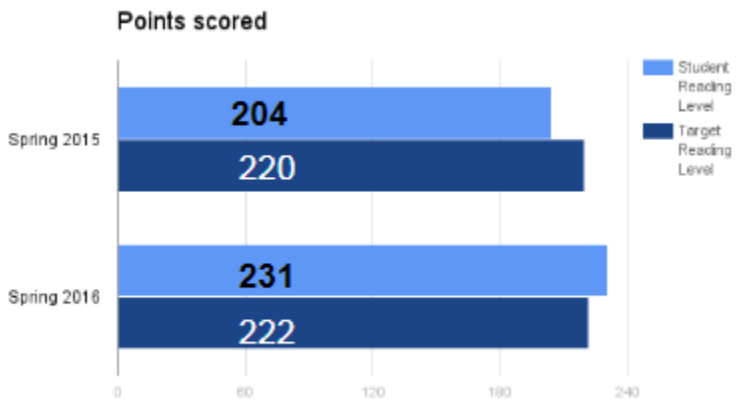

Table 2: Student scores vs expected scores after two years with heavy reading emphasis

I didn't do anything particularly unique or groundbreaking; I gave this student access to books, time to read books, and the expectations to read books. There was no teaching to the test, there were no shortcuts. It was literally putting a book in his hand and encouraging him.

This student is just one example of this happening. I do credit my classroom library for part of this. My students are surrounded by books, new reading material is very accessible to them. It allows them to find new and interesting books that keep them engaged. I should note that the administration at Savage has not taken much interest in what books I have in my library. As much as I would love to say it's because they value

free speech and decry censorship, I think it is mainly because I purchase the books with my own money. To her credit, Ms. Peterson was anti-censorship, and being that there is no system to check what books I'm putting into my library, I'm not about to go float the idea to my current administrators. I know that this freedom is not shared by other teachers. Once, I suggested to a fellow teacher that they get for their library *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Emily Danforth's novel about a teenage lesbian in Miles City, Montana. The teacher sighed, shook her head, and explained that her administration and school board wouldn't go for it. This is sad, misguided, and frankly dangerous behavior from those in power. Literature is a way not only to see the world, but also to see ourselves in it. Representation in the books we read and pass onto our students matters. I know that I have taught LGBTQ students. They deserve to see themselves in stories taught in my classroom. And for my straight students, they should know about the experiences of LGBTQ individuals. Through literature, they hopefully will come to see them as

The topic of representation and censorship is one that I explore in one my favorite units. I teach a banned books unit, and in it I utilize The Box of Doom.

The Box of Doom came to me while driving one day, along one of those long, boring stretches of Montana Highway that allows for the driver to safely contemplate other things. Seeing no cars, or turns for that matter, for miles around, I began to think about something in my classes that had been nagging me. Namely, that I wanted students to read more challenging books. I had at this time taught for two years and knew that my sophomore class for the next year was a fairly high achieving bunch. They were good

writers, weren't afraid of books, and usually gave good discussions. A few in particular I thought might make good candidates for an AP Literature course down the line. But, they also had a tendency to play it safe with their book selections. A lot of Louis L'Amour and Nicholas Sparks. There is nothing wrong with those authors, but I wanted them to branch out. I thought about what might get a student to read a somewhat challenging book. Then, remembering my own days as a teenager and sense of rebelliousness, I came upon it. You give them books that other people might say they shouldn't read.

While not every book in the literary canon is banned, enough of them are, that if you were to collect a number of them, you would get a decent-sized library. Enough for my class of nine students anyway. This could be how I encourage someone to read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Catcher in the Rye*. It could be how a student first discovers Toni Morrison or George Orwell. I resolved to teach a banned books unit. But, I wanted to do so with a little flair.

I decided that I would get a box, something that might look like a treasure chest. Then, I would paint it. Stencil the words "DANGER" and "CAUTION" on it. This is where the books would be kept. I remember excitedly pitching this idea to Ms. Peterson as I explained the requisition order for 20 banned books. I talked loud and fast. "So, I'll put these books in the box, and the kids won't know what's in them. And then, I'll tell them that inside is the most dangerous thing in the world...BOOKS!" She jumped back when I told her that, slightly frightened of my enthusiasm, but she signed the requisition order anyways.

I wound up purchasing an ammunition box from the Army-Navy surplus store in Billings. I brought it home, sanded it down and painted it black. That's how it stayed for months. Eventually, I bought stencils. It took some trial and error to get the letters legible. Spray paint didn't work, instead leaving a vague red or yellow blob on the box. After repainting it black, I would use regular acrylic paint to a much better effect. After the stencils were put on, I thought the box was missing something. I ordered some radiation warning stickers, put those on what was now officially the Box of Doom.

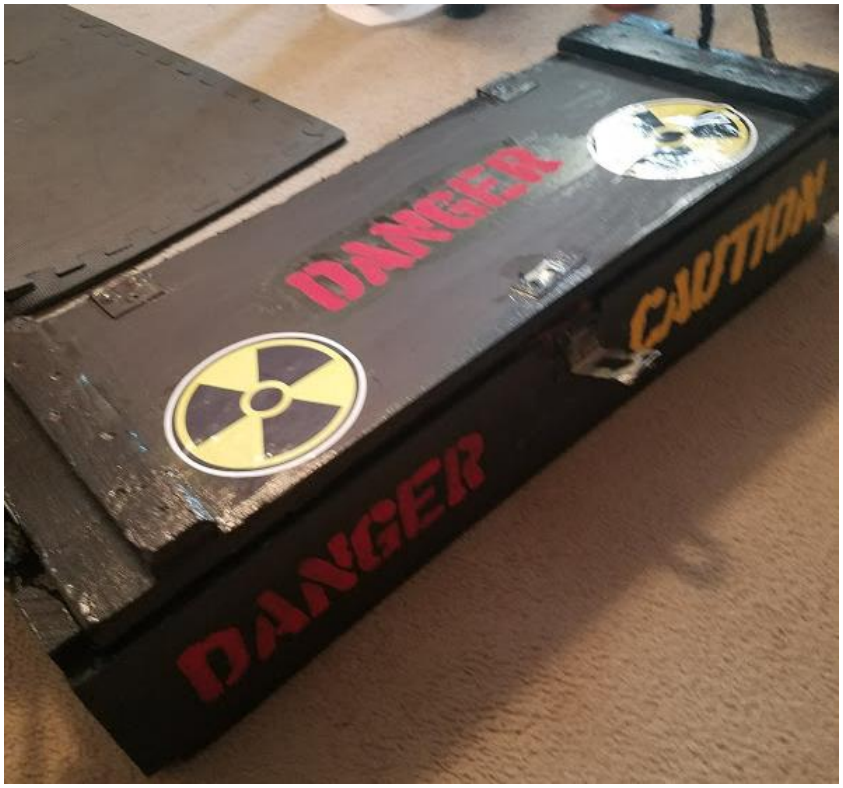

Figure 3"The Box of Doom"

About a week before I taught the unit, I carried the box into the school before the day started. It caused quite a commotion. Students would ask what was in the box, and I

would respond, “Something dangerous.” The kids guessed just about everything but books. While the box was not locked, no one ever went and opened it, and the suspense kept ratcheting up amongst the class, especially the sophomores who I promised would learn what was in the box the next week. When the appointed day came, and after a final presentation was delivered from one of their classmates, they demanded to know what was in the box.

“This box contains some of the most dangerous things known to man. This box contains ideas!” Maybe this is a bit cheesy, but I was not above laying it on thick. Besides, I had a captivated audience. The students were enraptured. Every eye on the class was on me. There was no looking at the clock or out the window. I opened the box., revealing the forbidden contents. “These books contain ideas that are so dangerous, that they have been banned.”

From there I went into my own presentation about banned books. I explained the terminology of challenged and banned books. I talked about why books are targeted. I talked about how that can be problematic. I also talked about how some challenges, depending on the community, might have merit, such as the banning of *The Anarchist’s Cookbook* or other books that explain how to inflict harm on others, or encourage it. The students asked great questions and we held a great discussion. By the end of class, they had each picked their own banned book to read. They would read it, do some research into why it was banned, and then determine if they agreed with the challenge or not. There were some classics in there, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Beloved*,

and *1984*. But there were also some more contemporary novels like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Bridge to Terabithia*.

While I did want my students to read more challenging books, I also wanted to demonstrate that they might be shocked to discover what had been challenged. I didn't assign each student a book, but let them peruse the box and make their own selection. In the end, most students wound up with books that I felt would challenge them, and they learned that these more challenging books were accessible. On top of that, I had some fun presenting the topic to them. Over the years, I still teach the unit. The students now know what is in the box, but it still makes for a nice prop in my classroom.

The banned books unit was not just a way to get students to get out of their usual reading norms, but also a way for them to read books that might fit the definition of "literary merit" as deemed by the College Board. While I could simply plug these types of books into my curriculum, the banned book unit allows students to have choice, to experience the kind of autonomy that I treasure. Students can choose to tackle *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or they might feel they are more suited for *The Chocolate War*. It allows students to challenge themselves as they see fit.

By allowing this student choice, I was also able to get an idea of who might be willing to take on an AP literature course. I myself had never taken an AP course. When I was in high school, I was a good student, but saw little purpose in the back-breaking work that goes into such classes. I was content with the regular offerings. But, an AP Course does offer the potential for college credit, and also serves as a way for students to learn what a college class feels like.

Two years after I first introduced the banned books unit, when that class was seniors, I offered AP Literature for the first time. I had four seniors and one junior sign up for the class.

I knew from my summer institute[10] that the AP Exam was a challenging, daunting undertaking. I had seen the example questions, looked at sample essay responses, and knew that the way ahead would be challenging for my students. Some of the intricacies of literature that I perhaps discussed briefly, would become a focal point of some studies. I worried not only if my students would be able to take on the exam, but if I could adequately prepare them. I designed a syllabus, hitting literary classics as I went. I brought in *The Metamorphosis*, *Frankenstein*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Christmas Carol*, *1984*, *Hamlet*, and *Leaves of Grass*. I also planned to use *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* as a guidebook. In addition, students had to read a book per semester that "met literary merit". To that end, I stocked my classroom library with books such as *Dracula*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Ceremony*, and more. The students, eyeing what was a heavy reading load with skepticism, wondered how the books were chosen, and what exactly literary merit meant.

---

[10] More on this in a later chapter.

"Literary merit is how the AP Exam defines quality literature. When you write on question three, the open prompt question, they want a certain type of book, one that is acknowledged to be of high quality."

"But, isn't that personal? People like different books," they countered.

"It is. But, think of it this way. The people who are going to assess these readings are, for the most part, high school teachers or community college professors. You might imagine them as being a bit stuffy. They are going to assess on what they know to be 'quality', and while we may disagree with them, they're the ones doing the grading."

I don't know that my answer was satisfactory, if only because I myself don't find it wholly satisfactory. I believe that the term 'literary merit' excludes genres, such as science fiction and fantasy. Though *Frankenstein* is a favorite of AP Literature syllabi, other works within the genre such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *Childhood's End*, and *Dune*, or works of fantasy such as *The Lord of the Rings* get passed over. 'Literary merit' also works to protect the traditional canon, and while the books included in the list of suggested works on question three have expanded to include women, authors of color, and LGBTQ authors, the works listed are still primarily white males, featuring books written primarily a century or more ago. While *The Great Gatsby* and *A Passage to India* have their place, it may be worthwhile for the College Board to reassess their standards of literary merit, broaden their scope to be more inclusive of more contemporary works and voices, or at the very least give more direction to AP teachers as to what that means.

I summarized those talking points to my class, and for the time being told my students to imagine a room full of white guys wearing jackets with elbow patches. That's who would grade their exams.

"Like you?" One said, noting that I often wore a jacket with elbow patches.

"Exactly."

One thing that I realized on the first day of AP Literature, was that these students might not be as motivated as I would have liked. I had assigned *The Scarlet Letter* for summer reading. In retrospect, I might not assign this book, because it can be dry and hard to get into. I chose it though because we had a classroom set (the books I requisitioned for the course wouldn't arrive until after school let out). *The Scarlet Letter* was also full of symbolism. I thought it might make for a good starting point in our discussions on symbolism and themes. I sort of expected my AP students to struggle with the book, but soldier through, and then come to class ready to discuss, or to have questions. Instead, they came to the class and said they didn't read the book.

Student buy-in was an issue in that class. Early in the year, I tried to engage them with finding the message behind a poem, and one senior said, "Can't you just tell us the answer?" Eventually, they warmed up slightly to the class, and while we could have good discussions, I always felt like there was another gear that could be achieved. I still felt like I was driving most of the discussion, and students weren't coming up with their own ideas as much as I would have liked. This was most evident when we read *1984*. Orwell's novel is, by its nature, a challenging read because what is real and established as fact in the book changes, often quite suddenly. O'Brien is someone who sympathizes with

Wintson until he's not. Big Brother can't be real, until he is, until he isn't. The class resisted the book, and some admitted to another teacher that they weren't reading it. I was at a loss. These were the best students in the school, all competent readers, good thinkers. And yet, when faced with a novel that was hard to get into, they wilted.

I think the class also struggled because of dishwashing. At Savage, students can earn money by washing dishes at lunch. Students get out of 4th period early to do this and come back to 5th period late. AP Literature was 5th period. As a staff, we often believe that students mostly wash dishes not to make money, but rather to get out of class.[11] When 4th and 5th periods are core classes or something like AP, students are missing valuable class time. All five of my AP students had signed up to do dishes, and it was October before I had a class period where all five of them were together for the entire class period. That summer, while discussing handbook changes, it was proposed that dishwashing students only be allowed to miss the last 15 minutes of 4th Period and the first 15 minutes of 5th period. That still adds up to an hour per week that a student is missing. That's an hour where they aren't asking questions, aren't part of discussions, aren't learning.

The dishwashing debacle speaks to one of the downsides of a rural school. Dishwashing is something that is done, mostly because it is always done. Our science

---

[11] Students only can work about an hour per day and are paid minimum wage. They will readily admit that it's not worth the money, though they keep signing up.

teacher, who has been here for over 30 years, says that in the past, fifth period was a shortened period, usually for electives, and that if a student missed it, that wasn't as big of a deal. But, as schedules changed, and core classes moved into those spots, the dishwashing did not change. By the time spring came around, my AP students began to feel the looming pressure of the AP Exam, and stopped taking shifts washing dishes. Our cook told me that she hated my AP class because it left her scrambling. It took every ounce of professionalism I had to not retort that I hated the hours and hours of missed class time that my students had accrued over the year.

I am not overly convinced that Advanced Placement Courses are the be all end all that they are made out to be. Those courses put the work of an entire year, and the promise of college credit, on one test. In my inaugural class, I fully believe that all five of my students should have received credit for a college level course. They wrote well, they could read well. But, when the scores came back, only one of them passed the exam with a three. The rest fell short with twos. I felt bad for those students who had worked hard for the entire year. They deserved better than one test to determine if they could receive college credit. I have been fortunate to partner with Dawson Community College for the next school year, where I will again offer this course, and be able to provide my students with college credit that reflects their entire year' worth of work. My plan is to develop a syllabus that would meet DCC's Introduction to Literature class and then have students work towards their college credit through the course of the full year. I want to remove the high stakes test and see that their grade and credit is a reflection of their entire body of

work. These partnerships have the potential to be beneficial to all: students, teachers, and institutions of higher learning, and I look forward to avoiding one more high stakes test.

Getting my program to this point has been a challenge. When I first arrived, I do not believe that my students would be ready for the rigors of an advanced course. I felt that doing an AP course early on would be setting my students up to fail. But, through work and time, I was able to build them up to that level. It has happened in other courses as well.

Students are better at public speaking, because they present frequently in my classes. Book talks are an example of this, but students often give presentations on their research projects or make persuasive speeches. In my sixth year, our science teacher returned from the state's annual Health Occupation Students of America conference absolutely gushing about one of our juniors being elected to a state-wide leadership role. "You would have been so proud of her," Jean told me. "Her speech was actually good!" She explained how the student had a rough draft of the speech, received feedback from Jean, and then gave an excellent speech the next day in order to get selected to the post.

Students are also writing better as well. Students still do struggle at times, but I see improvements. My students now know what a thesis is, even if sometimes they forget to include one in their rough drafts. They know what evidence is and how to tie it together. Student writing has improved greatly since I've been here. Much like reading level and public speaking, there are no shortcuts, it is just a matter of doing it. The best way to become a better writer is to write, and my students do.

I've also incorporated these skills into electives that the students find engaging. I have taught speech and debate, which encourages research skills and public speaking. The students love to engage one another in debate. The year-long course ends with the Governor of Bakken project, a quarter long unit in which the students all run for governor of a fictional state made from Eastern Montana and Western North Dakota. Through the project, students learn about economic policies, environmental laws, and the needs of infrastructure. All the while, their campaigns respond to news events that I make up, ranging from corporations that want to do business in the state, to protests, to acts of gun violence. I put in a lot of work for the class, but I have as much fun as the students do.

I've also taught creative writing, encouraging students to write about issues that they care about. I encourage them to use literature as a vehicle to educate people about topics like teenage depression, environmentalism, steroids in sports, and drug use. Students do research into theUou se topics to make their work sound more realistic and convincing. We aren't just writing for fun (though we do that as well) and we aren't just letting anything go. The project focuses their writing, makes them think critically about it, and takes it to a new level.

I have tried to change up the focus of my writing projects as well. When I first arrived in Savage, I focused on big ideas. I focused on major, national issues, such as gun control or abortion. I encouraged students to research these issues, find facts, and write critically. Those goals remain the same, but I am trying to get my students to shift the focus towards issues that impact their lives. I encourage them to write about issues surrounding farming, to look into the controversy surrounding our local canal. I ask them

how they would improve the area and encourage them to write about it. Further, I encourage them to utilize local sources of knowledge: parents, community leaders, even friends to help them gain insight into the place they know. Through that, they can still develop their writing skills, still develop their research skills, but they can connect their work directly to their experiences. Through this, they find a deeper connection to their work and the classroom task enriches all involved.

Reading, writing, speaking and listening are the main skills I am tasked with delivering to my students and I must do it all alone. While I believe that it is the duty of every teacher in a school to teach these skills, relative to their fields, it largely falls on me to focus on them in my classroom. I have been given a great deal of freedom in how I pursue those goals. My elective ideas have been approved, my requisition orders signed, and I believe that this support has allowed me to develop a strong English department.

But, I know there can always be improvement. I know there will always be students that don't quite grasp a concept. There will be classes that don't buy into something I do. There will be struggling readers and writers. I cannot just focus on those that will enter my honors courses or focus on my electives; I must teach everybody. I must reach everybody. I haven't finished building my program and I never will. It will keep growing, changing, adapting. I will change out the books I teach, I will introduce new writing assignments, I will take on new electives. If my interest in a unit or book wanes, the students know. To that end, I have to keep having fun with what I teach and keep it interesting. After all, it's just me in the department.

CHAPTER FIVE: SAVAGE, THE COMMUNITY

Figure 4: Welcome to Savage sign

Despite the pictured sign, Savage is a blink and you'll miss it type place. I know this because I passed through it a handful of times going from Bozeman to Kodi's home in Froid without ever registering its existence. Other than to remark that it was an unusual name for a town, I had never thought of Savage, let alone stopped in it, on my way through. Savage is exactly the type of town that Wallace Stegner writes about in *The American West as Living Space*:

> The loneliness and vulnerability of those towns always moves me, for I have lived in them. I know how the world of a child in one of them is bounded by weedy prairie, or the spine of the nearest dry range, or by flats where plugged tin cans lie rusting and the wind has pasted paper and plastic against the sagebrush. I know how precious is the safety of a few known streets and vacant lots and familiar houses. I know how the road in both directions both threatens and beckons. I know that most of the children in such a town will sooner or later take that road, and that only a few will take it back. (25)

That description so fits Savage that I used it when I had the honor of addressing the Junior-Senior Banquet in my third year of teaching. I used the quote as a starting point. These upperclassmen were getting set to begin journeys that might take them far away from Savage. But, this was their starting point, their origin. Savage was the origin of my career, and there are few places better than a small school and small community to get your start.

It might be said that in small towns everyone knows your name, and that seems like an exaggeration. But, I learned that as a new teacher, pretty much everyone did know my name when I arrived. A few weeks after I moved to Savage, just prior to the beginning of the school year, Kodi and I helped with a playground remodel. Many people knew who I was before I introduced myself. One even knew of my background in radio. It felt good to be helping my new community, all the while making connections with the people of Savage. The same people who came to help the playground are the same ones you see at ballgames, at the store, walking around town. Now, people would wave to me on the street. These are the moments of recognition that go far in becoming comfortable in a place.

These connections and relationships are important because living in these rural communities may be the most challenging aspect of teaching in them. Yes, there are challenges of being your own department, and teaching is not easy in any location. But, coming from a college town, with all its entertainment options, eateries, museums, and your social network to a town of just over 300 people is jarring. Suddenly, it isn't a

question of what movie to see, but bemoaning the fact that *Pitch Perfect 2* is the only movie playing within 70 miles. It's knowing that if you want to eat out, it's either the town bar or a 20-mile drive to Sidney.

I have felt fortunate that when I came to Savage that I was already married. I've said often that if I hadn't been, I would have left Savage long ago because it is isolating to live here. I have friends, yes. But, I'm not the type to go to the bar every weekend. I'm not a church goer. My avenues for social interaction are limited. I had Kodi to keep me company when we first arrived. It also helped that she was also a teacher. After three years of being the librarian in Glendive, she moved back into the classroom. She became an English teacher in Fairview, a Class C school 30 miles north of Savage. After Glendive repeatedly failed to pass school levies, and a massive shake-up in the teaching staff, she felt it was time to move on, even if it meant giving up her library. She traded one commute for another. Throughout our time here, we have supported one another. We talk about our days, our frustrations, our joys. Without that level of support, I don't know how long I would have remained in Savage.

Single teachers may not have this support, but the locals will try and help them find it. In my sixth year, one of our new elementary teachers sent me a horrified text. Our new superintendent had just tried to set her up with a man who is in the process of getting a divorce. We are both aghast. I can only ever manage to really reply, "What?!?" as she relayed the story. Other teachers through the years here have recounted times that adults and even students in class have gone over the list of dating options within Savage and tried to play matchmaker. The idea isn't without merit. Our science teacher readily

admits that she married into the community and that's why she has stayed for over 30 years.

It isn't just a need to want to keep good teachers that spurs this action. It's a need for people. Despite the number of people who attend Donald Trump rallies with shirts that proclaim that America is "full", rural places are bleeding population. In 2017, the USDA's John Cromatie reported that rural places in America had been losing population for six years. While the Bakken region in particular had seen an uptick in population with the oil boom, the USDA notes, "Spurred by an energy boom, large sections of the Great Plains turned around decades of population decline. This is most visible in sparsely settled regions such as the Williston Basin in western North Dakota and eastern Montana. However, the most recent year of data (2015-16) shows a significant reversal in population growth in these energy-sector regions, in line with recent cutbacks in oil production." It is becoming increasingly clear that rural places cannot continue to survive the boom and bust cycles that have usually dominated the western United States. Cromatie concludes his article by writing, "Even if temporary, this small but historic shift to overall population loss highlights a growing demographic challenge facing many regions across rural and small-town America: population growth from natural increase is no longer large enough to counter cyclical net migration losses." Already in the spring of 2020, with the COVID-19 outbreak, there's a slow in energy production. People are losing jobs and will likely leave the area. In Savage, a local coal mine is slated to close in a few years, taking with it several jobs and a great deal of tax revenue for the school. David L. Brown and Kai A. Schaft explain in *Rural People and Communities in the 21st*

Century: Resilience & Transformation, "Compared with larger economies containing a wide range of employers, undiversified smaller economies are more vulnerable to economic downturn because a particular sector's lagging fortunes can have wide-ranging adverse impacts across the community," (206). While we can only wait to see what the impacts of this economic slowdown will have on Savage, the imminent closure of the mine was enough to lead to serious questions about the future of the school here. Over $100,000 in tax revenue comes to the school from the mine. Without it, we may be forced to combine grades in the elementary, eliminate art or music, or it could be the domino that leads to the closure of the school. It would not be the first rural school to shutter its doors.

In Savage, one only needs to look at the pictures of the graduating classes that adorn the walls of the school to get a sense of the declining population. Where senior classes used to number in the high teens and twenties, now Savage routinely graduates classes of fewer than 10 students. Old maps of the town show that we used to have a bank, a jewelry store, and even a pickle factory. Those are no longer here. And as for feeling under siege, that is all too real in the effort to save the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation System.

The irrigation system, known better in town as the canal, is the lifeblood of the community and county. For over 100 years, it has diverted water from the Yellowstone River to farmers who use it to irrigate their crops, mostly sugar beets. Without the canal, the farming operations in the area would not be possible, and a major section of the region's economy would quite literally dry up. However, environmental groups, most

notably the Defenders of Wildlife, have argued that the Intake Dam, the place where water is diverted from the river, is harmful to the endangered pallid sturgeon. From the Defenders of Wildlife Website:

> The best way to save the pallid sturgeon population in the Yellowstone River is to remove the existing structure at Intake and to restore a free-flowing river, giving pallid sturgeon access to an additional 165 miles of river. Unfortunately, our most recent preliminary injunction was overturned by a higher court in April 2018, meaning that construction of the concrete dam could begin immediately.

While the Defenders of Wildlife have said that they want to ensure that irrigators still have access to water, the plans for doing so run into issues ranging from the noise pollution problems of pumps to questions about who would pay for pumps. In the meantime, the group touts surveys that proclaim that "Polling Finds Strong Support for Pallid Sturgeon Recovery in Montana." The report of the survey touts the results from the Billings, Missoula, Helena, and Great Falls markets. Strangely, the results from the area most impacted by the dam's removal are not listed.

Defenders of Wildlife uses such a poll to say that there is support for their cause as they litigate the future of the dam and the surrounding farmers. For many in the area, their livelihoods are in the hands of judges in other places, appointed by Presidents who

don't know about the issue.[12] This serves as a prime example of the frustration that many in rural places feel: their lives are increasingly being controlled by outside forces.

I consider myself to be an environmentalist, but that position becomes harder to maintain when groups that I might usually agree with attack the livelihood of my community. Without the canal, the main economic sector in our county will get cut dramatically. And while the courts have so far sided with farmers, the litigation continues. Likewise, I believe that the world would be better off without coal, but the imminent closure of our local mine makes me wish that just this one could stay open. It is easy to dismiss rural people as ignorant when it comes to environmental issues, to say that they don't care about the planet or that they don't know what is good for them. This is misguided. Rural people are weighing their livelihoods, their futures, the fate of their very communities in ways that outsiders do not.

This undiversified economy has another side effect as well. It relates directly to what Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas termed the "rural brain drain", that is the migration of young people away from rural places. They write in the introduction to their book, *Hollowing out the Middle*, "Given that young people are now rural America's most precious declining resource, it seems that the best way to preserve the nation's small towns will be to create new sorts of conservation efforts to invest more efficiently in

---

[12] The closest federal district court is in Billings. Most of the hearings for this case have taken place in Great Falls.

these young people," (9). However, questions loom large about what that sort of investment would look like and given how weary of change rural places can be, it may be worth questioning what it would take for that to happen.

Rural places are paradoxical in the sense that they are welcoming and kind to people, but that does not mean that trust is given easily. One interview subject for *Small-Town America: Finding community, shaping the future* told Robert Wuthnow that it took decades before she felt completely welcomed into the town. It takes more than moving into a community to become a member. This is why, after six years of living in Savage, I still don't quite feel like I fit in. Part of that is that I don't partake in the normal ways of socializing, as mentioned above. I don't go to the bar or to church. But, another big part of it is politics.

It would be impossible in 2020 to write a book about rural America without talking about rural support of Donald Trump and the Republican Party in general. Wuthnow examines why in another book, *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America*. He writes,

> The moral outrage of rural America is a mixture of fear and anger. The fear is that small-town ways of life are disappearing. The anger is that they are under siege. The outrage cannot be understood apart from the loyalties that rural Americans feel toward their communities. It stems from the fact that the social expectations, relationships, and obligations that constitute the moral communities they take for granted and in which they live are year by year being fundamentally fractured.
>
> The fracturing is evident in the fact that many rural communities are declining in population. Schools are closing, businesses are leaving, and jobs are disappearing. It is evident in families raising children who they

> know will live elsewhere and in parents commuting father to work, shop, or worship. (6-7).

It is clear that something will have to change in order for rural places to survive. Economies here will have to diversify in order to give young people a reason to come back. Without people, small towns run the risk of losing their schools. Losing a school can be devastating to a town, because of the important role that the school plays in rural places. Mara Casey Tieken writes in *Why Rural Schools Matter*, " (Schools) offer the sorts of shared activities with common goals - fund-raising for a class trip, playing on the same basketball team, gathering for the same graduation - that tend to build relational ties, linking together a diverse group of individuals. Other spaces cannot play this role," (137). Montana's Hi-Line is dotted with places that have become shells of their former selves when losing a school. Antelope, Outlook, Flaxville, Whitetail, and Dooley are just some of the towns that used to have schools in northeast Montana. In a feature on closed Montana high schools for 406sports.com, Chase Doak puts it this way.

> For most schools, the decision to close boiled down to the same reason: a lack of students. But the circumstances leading to those low student populations vary from political to downright tragic. Some schools were a casualty of their town's dependence upon a single industry. Some fell victim to natural or industrial disaster. Others simply couldn't find enough money.
>
> The stories of many of the small towns in central and eastern Montana follow the same basic pattern: A railroad is constructed, the town is founded to support either the workers on the railroad or an industry that benefits from said railroad, the railroad's influence wanes, and the town's residents leave to find work elsewhere.

The school's close and are boarded up. The school is forgotten, the town is forgotten. As Savage and Montana's rural schools face an increasingly globalized society, the question becomes if they will be next. Rural places, because of their economies, have always run the risk of becoming ghost towns. While there is an instinct to hold on close to tradition, to what has worked in the past, doing so runs the risk of losing everything.

The last line of Savage's fight song reads, "Savage will never die!" The time is coming when that lyric may very well be put to the test.

CHAPTER SIX: SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES

Figure 5: Savage takes on Richey-Lambert in six-man football action

During my first year in Savage, my juniors have just finished *Of Mice and Men*. The girls all cry over the ending. The boys show no emotion. It's like this every year. High school boys don't show emotion, or don't allow themselves to show emotion. It's not cool to care about stuff. I'm no longer a high school boy. The book always makes me cry and I tell the juniors this. I tell them that I've read the book four times, and the ending still gets me. I tell them that each time I read it, a choke up a bit earlier and earlier. I talk about the American Dream, and how sure, maybe George could buy that little place and live off the fat of the land with Candy, but it wouldn't be the same, because it was George and Lennie's dream.

A hand goes up. It's the school's sports star, Joshua. I call on him.

"So, did you do any sports in high school?"

I explain that I ran cross-country and track, but that isn't really the point. Joshua is not convinced. He's not sure it would be worth it to show emotion, and he's not sure that what I did constituted as sports. The discussion soldiers on.

In Savage, and small schools like it, sports are king. There is no way to sugarcoat it. We might talk in our staff meetings on making sure that academics are prioritized, that work in the classroom won't play second fiddle to what happens under the Friday night lights, but it will. The school's test scores aren't the focus of conversation. Parent-teacher conferences are sparsely attended. My National Honor Society induction ceremony doesn't even have all the inductees' parents at it. But, fall Fridays see the town turn out for football games. In February, we'll drive through a blizzard to watch tournament basketball. Quarter four is practically a wash with track and golf meets peppering the schedule.

I'm part of the sports landscape in Savage. Before I moved to town, Ms. Peterson asked me to announce the football games. I've taken that on, along with operating the scoreboards at football, volleyball, and basketball. Doing so puts me at the center of the action, and I love it. I love watching football from the field's crow's nest, describing the action for the fans still in their cars. I love getting excited and bellowing into the microphone, "TOUCHDOWN, WARRIORS!" as fans honk their horns and cheer loudly. I love announcing the starting line-ups, doing my part to get the kids excited for their game, and always saving another level on my voice for the seniors taking the field or

court for their final season. I love keeping clock at basketball games, when the music in the gym is blaring, the energy from the fans is palpable for the 32-minute game. I love watching my students take on different personas when they play. The kid who doesn't take anything seriously during the day is stone-faced as the ball is tipped. Kids that are normally tense seem more at ease, and vice versa. I get a front row seat to watch them in a different setting.

Sports also gives me a way to connect with them. I often talk about their games with them, asking them about interesting plays or giving praise for good games. In my sixth year, I told a freshman girl she had a great basketball game going up against an opponent who will be playing college ball next year. "She couldn't stop you! It was great, you were too quick!"

She beams, "I know! She's not great on defense, a bit slow." This isn't just throw away praise. I'm signaling to her that I recognize her achievements outside of class, and I find value in them. While I stress over and over again that academics matter, that passing my classes is mandatory to graduate, I want them to know that I believe in them and support them outside of my class as well.

I also prefer being at the scorer's table for basketball, because as much as I enjoy the sport, I found out that I should not coach it. My first two years, I coached elementary basketball in what can only be described as a misguided idea. On the last day of school before Winter Break my first year, I walked off the gym floor towards the equipment room, looking to put a dodgeball away. As I came around the corner, my mind already on

the nap I was about to take once I got home, there was our PE teacher, Mr. Huber, talking to Ms. Peterson.

"Hey, Mr. Hoffmann! You want to coach elementary basketball with me?" I was not overly surprised that Mr. Huber would be coaching elementary basketball, as I assumed that most PE teachers have at least one sport that they'd like to coach. I was slightly surprised that he had asked me to join him.

"Well, I don't know much about basketball..." I said.

"Oh, that doesn't matter. I'll run the whole thing, I just need an assistant. This will be the easiest thousand dollars you'll ever make."

"Sure," I said, mostly from the lack of a reason to say no. And just like that, I became an elementary basketball coach. Me being me, as soon as I got home, I ordered a book on coaching beginning basketball, a pair of gym shoes, and a new basketball for good measure.

If one doesn't know how to coach a sport, the elementary version is probably not the worst place to learn it. I knew more about the sport than the players, and could offer them some advice on what to do. As for the actual plays and drills, I left that to Mr. Huber, who had more of a knack for it. I did not want to be a mere observer, so I participated along with them, giving them what pointers I could. My biggest learning curve was learning the names of the elementary students.

For our first few games, we played a girls' game and then a boys' game, and Mr. Huber was the head coach for both of those. He stood on the sideline directing plays. I sat

on the bench and offered encouragement and reminders to pay attention during timeouts. It was living up to the promised hype of an easy stipend.

And then we went to Richey-Lambert.

Unlike Savage and the few other road games we had travelled to, Richey Schools had two gyms. And so, they could run two games at the same time. They invited Froid-Medicine Lake for the day as well, so everyone would get two games. And sure enough, our boys and girls would be playing at the same time. I told Mr. Huber that I would take the girls. I got the sense that he preferred to coach the boys, mostly because one of the tallest kids in our entire school was a sixth-grade boy. Mr. Huber was surprised by the decision, but went along with it. And so, after watching the first quarter of the boys' game, I led the girls to the old gym for their match-up with Froid-Lake.

The old gym was aptly named. The court wasn't even full sized, with the three-point line meeting the sideline before it could get down to the baseline. The backboards were wooden. It felt old-fashioned.[13] I came up with a starting line-up, based on experience and ability, but I also knew that what I wanted more than anything was to make sure each child earned playing time each quarter. I didn't necessarily care if we won or not, I wanted the kids to have fun, to get a chance to play, and to enjoy the moment.

---

[13] Many schools in the area have such a gym, used for practices. Then they hold games in the "new gym", which more often than not, was constructed in the 60s.

I subbed with regularity, giving starters a chance to catch their breath, getting fresh legs in. It isn't uncommon at the high school level, where talent drops off considerably from starters to nonstarters, to have players play the whole game. Not so much with elementary ball. I yelled encouragement, and then noted in a chart I had made when a player got into the game for each quarter.

If high school basketball hinges on big makes at important times, elementary basketball hinges on the few makes that happen at all. Unless there was a clear lay-up opportunity (and not even then) baskets were at a premium. It wasn't uncommon for elementary games to end with both teams scoring in the teens. That day, Savage had an advantage in both height and quickness and used it. And, as the game entered into the fourth quarter, we were winning.

I put in original starters to begin the fourth, hoping a few quick baskets would cement the game and I could give other girls a lot of playing time. But, as will happen in these games, Froid-Lake hit a few shots and suddenly the game was much closer. What was an eight-point lead, got whittled to four. As we turned the ball over[14] I pulled at my hair. Just as it is hard to not get caught up in the moment at the scorer's table, it is even harder when coaching. Even when your goal is to have fun and get everyone playing time, natural competitiveness takes over. I called a timeout.

---

[14] Thankfully, they don't keep track of such a stat at the elementary level.

"Two minutes left, girls," I said. "Look, this has been a good game, and we're in control of it. They've made some shots, but let's really focus to close this out, play smart defense, get a win and then have fun!" Maybe not the stuff of a Hollywood script, but it worked. Whether it was our defense or just the natural challenges fifth graders face against a 10-foot hoop, we held on to the lead and I won my head coaching debut.[15] Most of all, I remember the faces of my players, elated at winning the game, of seeing the work they put into practice come to fruition.

We didn't have many more moments like that. In my two years of coaching elementary basketball, I won two games. I came to view coaching as another class to prep for. Kodi said I was more on-edge during the season. I never got the sense that parents were upset with the losses, but I also knew that there were much better coaches out there than me: people that could actually teach the fundamentals of basketball. I stepped down after my second year, and have been content to watch from the scorer's table ever since.

That doesn't mean my coaching days are done. In my sixth year, I was supposed to coach junior high track, but a global pandemic had other plans. As mentioned previously, I have a background in track. But beyond that, I see coaching as a way to be involved in my students' lives, to continue to have a positive impact. It's one thing to cheer them on from the sidelines, quite another to teach them to run faster or jump higher,

---

[15] Partially sweetened because it came against Froid-Lake, where my wife graduated from. Bragging rights!

to be with them through the good and the bad, and to see them succeed when they compete. Before I went into teaching, I coached cross-country for a season at my old high school. I saw kids improve, I saw kids come together as a team, and I saw how fun it was to work with them. Without that season, without those interactions, I might never have become a teacher.

Still, as vested as I am in sports at the school, I am often frustrated by them. Before Savage went to a four-day week, we often lost class time on Fridays when students boarded busses early to make the long road trips for football or basketball. One week in my first year of teaching, I had my full 8th grade class for one day, as junior high football was scheduled on both Monday and Friday, and volleyball was away on Tuesday and Thursday. In Montana's large, AA schools, the absence of the football team might not be all that big of a disruption. But, when nearly every student takes part in sports, when one team is away, your class is effectively halved. When both teams are away, as will happen during basketball season, it's a wash. I tell new high school teachers that during basketball tournament weeks, it's best to bring a book. No one is in the building anyways.

Sports is one of the major reasons why Savage moved to a four-day week. With no school on Fridays, students don't miss nearly as much school. We can't do much about tournaments; because of their size, they will always take place during the week. Regular season games however don't impact class time as much. The main exception to this is volleyball, which is rarely, if ever, scheduled for Fridays. Football is king, and nothing is scheduled against it. This forces volleyball into midweek games. But, there has

been a more concerted effort in recent years to play volleyball games on Saturdays as well, and minimize missed class time. Sports dictating our days in the week is only a natural extension of sports dictating our starting time. Research continually shows that teenagers function better later in the morning, and yet we drag them to school and begin at 8 am so that sports practices can happen during daylight hours.

Additionally, students will readily admit that they care more about sports than class. It's hard not to, a big game against a rival school that will be played in front of the whole town is going to be more interesting than *Beowulf*. The town isn't going to turn out for their test. The town doesn't even turn out for parent-teacher conferences.

In Savage, there is some speculation on what declining enrollment might mean for our academics, but what really gets people out to board meetings is the talk of co-oping with another school. Several years before I arrived, Savage had a football co-op with Lambert, with the team referred to as the Furies. Now, with the boy population in Savage going down, we are reaching out again to see if we could partner with them for six-man football. The former partnership ended in bad blood and feuds. Those that are optimistic about it working this time say that was the work of certain families that no longer have kids in schools.

From what I can tell though, most co-ops in our area have some level of feud. Richey-Lambert has seemingly been on the verge of breaking up every year. My relatives in Froid report dissatisfaction with their partnership with Medicine Lake. The cross-state co-op of Westby-Grenora is rumored to break up as well. Small towns have a lot of pride, and swallowing that to join forces with your former rival is no small feat. Add in the

additional costs incurred by moving players for practices and games, there's little wonder that friction exists.

The alternative though is no sports. Even dropping down to six-man football, Savage barely has enough boys to field a team. In the coming years, unless a new family comes in, there will be seven, not enough to safely conduct a season. There are no easy choices when it comes to co-oping.

In these moments it can be tempting to envision a world without high school sports. How might it look? Amanda Ripley reported for The Atlantic that for some schools, it might actually work. For her piece, "The Case Against High-School Sports" she details the story of the Premont Independent School System in Texas. The superintendent there, Ernest Singleton, suspended all sports, citing runaway costs. The district had already cut teaching positions, and the $150,000 per year athletic budget was a way to keep staff at the school. The school was also threatened with closure by the state due to low academic performance. While the decision was unpopular, it did yield some results.

"That first semester, 80 percent of the students passed their classes, compared with 50 percent the previous year. About 160 people attended parent-teacher night, compared with six the year before," Ripley reports. While the case in Premont might be a small sample size, it does show what can happen when the community is forced to focus on academics for a change.

And yet, I resist calling for sports in schools to be eliminated. For one, one of the reasons why a school is so integral to a community is its sports teams. People come to the

football field or gym to watch a game, they go to the bar after the game to discuss it, they think back on when they played and tell those stories to current students, creating a bridge across generations. To lose this would be devastating.

The other thing that would be lost is that it is the students' connection to school. One principal Ripley talked to said, "I've seen truancy issues completely turned around once students begin playing sports." In Savage, I've done my part to try and recruit kids to go out for sports. One girl is known to have a rough home life and struggles in school. I see sports as a way for her to interact more with her friends, to give her some motivation to get her grades up, and to feel like she's part of the community. The efforts from me and the rest of the staff are shrugged off. She's not interested in going out for sports. She isn't sure if her dad would allow her anyways. Our hopes of finding a way for her to connect with her peers and school have hit a wall, and the struggles continue.

Ripley writes in her piece, "...more than 20 countries are pulling off better high-school graduation rates than we are, with mostly nominal athletic offerings...America has not found a way to dramatically improve its children's academic performances over the past 50 years, but other countries have - and they are starting to reap the economic benefits." Given the issues that face rural America, something must shift to place priority on education. The vast majority of student-athletes in Savage will not receive a scholarship to play at a college. I've seen it happen, but for most students that is a pipe dream. Athletics is not their ticket to college, to scholarships, to a better life; education is. In order for students to realize this, parents must realize it too. That begins with pushing students academically, to contact teachers, to show up on parent night. There are simply

too many issues confronting rural America to place education on the backburner in favor of sports.

Yet, they continue to do so.

CHAPTER SEVEN: COMING BACK

During my sixth year of teaching, I admitted to my mom that I get depressed during Montana winters.

"It's so cold that it hurts. You can't be outside. You can't go anywhere because you don't know how the roads will be. Everything looks the same," I complained.

"Well, there are other paths you could choose, but you seem to not want to," she responded, some thousand miles away and forty-some degrees warmer.

Her comment falls in a pattern from family and friends who have wondered, seemingly ever since I moved to Montana a decade ago, when would I be leaving it. For some, my time in Montana, and my time in Savage in particular, is seen as something temporary, a pit stop, a launching pad to presumably bigger and better things. It is usually meant well. My mom is a Montanan after all, but from friends, it can come off as condescending. There is a hint of, "Why are you still.... *there*?" One friend in particular makes recruiting pitches to come back to Washington and teach where I grew up. "When you come back..." he starts off. "We can coach together...we can raise our daughters together." He has made my decision for me: I only have to do my part, as if leaving the place that has been my home for six years, where I started and built a career, is something so easily done.

Admittedly, part of this is my own doing. I have been open in the past that I would like to return to Washington. I have not hidden from my colleagues that I don't plan on being a lifer in Savage. I also readily admit that I feel isolated here, cut off from my family. I feel a pang every time my siblings get together, every time friends post

about hanging out. There are times that, as nice as it is to be a one-man department, I yearn for English colleagues to be in the building with me. And yet, so far, I have kept choosing Savage. I am not stuck here. I am not forced into being here. Kodi and I have talked about leaving before, and yet at the end of the day, we continue to choose to make our home here.

So why stay? It is because this place has become a part of me. The students, the school, and the community have become intertwined with our lives, giving us some roots here.

During my third year of teaching, a student came in search of someone to talk to. This surprised me, I had gotten the impression that he didn't care for English class and me in particular. For whatever reason, he came to me and opened up to me.

For the student's confidentiality,[16] I won't repeat the conversation. He told me about home life, about feeling torn. Sometimes, older people tend to look at something like this as teenage angst, something to be written off. But, there is a genuine pain in his voice. Often, his eyes are wide, fearful of what he is admitting. I nod along, trying to be sympathetic. Almost off-handedly he says, "I'm just waiting for someone else to abandon me." He said it as if it weren't important, a minor detail in his confession, but it has stuck with me, even years after he said it. How do you respond to something like that? I can

[16] Savage is a small school. Changing names can only do so much.

think of nothing in my pre-service learning that could possibly prepare me for it. Everything that I say seems too small. I encourage him to draw, something I know he enjoys. I talk about journaling as a way to process. What can I say? What can I do?

At that moment, I felt like the only thing I could do was to stay. He chose to confide in me, and I can honor that by not being the person to abandon him next. He isn't looking for a father figure, just someone at school who will be in his corner. I knew then that I would stay in Savage at least until this student graduated.

He and I would have many chats throughout his high school career, me always offering advice that seemed inadequate. "High school is temporary; you can get out of this place." I even admitted a few times that I was out of my depth with giving him advice. It didn't seem to matter; he knew he could come to me. He knew I wouldn't judge him for having a bad day, that my room was a safe place for him. I didn't want to risk him feeling that I was leaving him, his problems behind. Maybe more than that, I didn't want to feel like I was doing that.

Seemingly in every class, there is a student that you worry about getting to the "finish line" of graduation. He was one, but he made it. I hugged him tight at graduation. "Be proud of this, be proud of yourself," I told him. My relief that he made it to the finish line is countered by the senior the next year, and the year after that.

I think back to one such senior. He was, as most of the kids in Savage are, a "good kid". He was engaging, polite, good humored. His sophomore year he came to class saying, "I heard that you spit fire when you rap!" I laughed it off, "I wouldn't know the first thing about rapping," but he persisted. As we completed *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I

offered to display my "mad rap skills" by composing a rap about Atticus Finch. I did so, the class got a laugh out of it, which was the point, but maybe some of them got a little something more out of the book.

As much as this student inspired me to write a rap about Atticus (and later, one about *The Hobbit*), he struggled with absences, and nearly every quarter found himself getting points deducted for missing too many days of class. Savage's policy stated that every day missed after eight absences[17], the student loses 2% off their grade. Steven, I'll call him, would be deducted six points. Given his struggles with schoolwork, this often would have moved him into failing.

I also knew that Steve's family had a long history of dropping out of school. I wanted him to succeed. And, time after time, I fudged the record a bit and made him pass. This wasn't to keep him eligible for sports, it was hoping that each time he would mend his ways, pass on his own merit, and earn the right to graduate.

He never did. He got through Savage, he graduated, but the lesson that I hoped he would learn, that I pleaded with him to learn, never materialized. I fear that my plan backfired, that he internalized the wrong things. I can only tell myself to do better for the next group of students, to stand firm in decisions, and to hope that even if they fail, they'll regroup and pass, this time on their own.

---

[17] Now six, due to the four-day school week.

Of course, there are the students that I don't worry about making it to that finish line. These are the students that I find most exciting, the ones that push themselves. I routinely am wowed by what they contribute to discussions. They are the ones who make connections in literature that jump past the mundane and simplistic analysis that happens all too often in high school classrooms. They are the ones who write with expanded vocabularies and take charge of their own learning.

Given that I teach 7-12, I get to watch all students grow. But, with certain students, there's a desire to see what all they can do. How good can this junior high poet become at writing? What insights will this student, who is understanding *Animal Farm* and its injustices as a freshmen, make when she gets to *Brave New World* as a senior? Because I am the department, I don't have to track that student down or their teacher in a few years' time, I can see them develop, guide them.

It's how I knew a certain class would be ready for an AP-caliber course. I knew I had students that could rise to the college level, and what was more, they would trust me to be able to guide them there. Additionally, I can tailor my classes, beginning in junior high, with an eye towards college-level courses. It's the introduction of some literary terms to seventh graders, it's the deepening of argumentative writing with freshmen. I can build all students up, so that when they become upperclassmen, they can sign up for AP, and take it with confidence. And, if they don't, I know that they'll be able to tackle whatever comes next for them in education. There is no curriculum mapping, no meetings, no coordination. There is just me and the students. Sometimes, being alone has its merits.

In my sixth year, I talked about the writing process with my freshmen, about how it can be difficult, but worth it in the end. At the end of class, a girl came up to me. “I’ve written some stories...I don’t know if they’re any good.”

“I’d love to read them,” I said. I am skeptical that she will send them to me. She’s shy and seems like the type to keep her words close to her. And yet, by the time school lets out that day, she has sent me the stories, trusting me to read them, and to guide her in making them better.

While students are a major reason why I continue to choose Savage, the administration plays a big role in that as well. In my first year of teaching, Ms. Peterson encouraged me to, “Make it yours” in terms of my curriculum. Any book I wanted to teach, any project I wanted to try, she signed off on. She understood that I did not like to teach out of textbooks, that I could effectively teach out of novels, and she encouraged me to pursue that. There was no talk of needing to teach to a test. No pressure to teach out of the ancient textbooks in my room. She allowed me to become me. She was also instrumental in our school’s partnership with the Yellowstone Writing Project. She was on board with that project from the start, even when its initial goals were vague. She encouraged me and the rest of our school team to become leaders within the school, giving us the opportunity to do something more than just serve on a committee, but actually affect curriculum and academic direction. That trust and support has kept me going, even though she has left the school since then.

In Savage, I have also felt heard when I weigh in on issues affecting the whole school. In my second year of teaching, Joe Brott from the Montana School Board

Association came to Savage to begin working on a strategic plan for the district. The idea was to make a "big, audacious goal" for the district to work towards. Through a series of meetings, Ms. Peterson, the board, some community members, and some staff worked through a series of long-term goals. These goals included having ADA-compliant facilities, a bigger library, adult education courses, improved community relations, and student access to up to date technology.[18]

Throughout the process, I talked about what I saw. It didn't matter that I was only in my second year of teaching. It didn't matter that I was relatively new to Savage. It only mattered that I was a stakeholder. My voice was valued. I talked frankly about teacher pay, and how Savage stacked up with larger schools. I also talked about the cost of living in the area, and how it made it hard to keep up, let alone get ahead with savings. I talked about how the library was already fairly small, but because it served a K-12 student body, it was limited in selection, especially for upper level readers. I talked about wanting to find a way to free up my schedule to teach more electives. Among the goals listed in the plan are for the school to have, "...increased salaries and benefits to be competitive within the region,"; " (A) bigger library----accessibility to all students,"; and "... dedicated junior high teachers to teacher junior high, which allows high school teachers more flexibility in offering electives."

---

[18] The full plan can be found here: http://www.savagepublicschool.com/uploads/1/3/2/1/13214614/strategic_plan_adopted.docx

I always left these meetings feeling that Savage Public School was moving towards something great and that I had a part to play in that. Administrators that want teachers to stay at rural schools long term have to find ways to ensure inclusion with their staff. I know this because the closest I've come to leaving is when I feel like my voice isn't being heard.

In my sixth year of teaching, we get a new Superintendent, Mrs. Potter. We have a one-on-one chat in July about the upcoming school year, where I talked about my Place-based Writing course. In it, students would write about Savage, with an eye towards helping to save our local irrigation canal that has been attacked by outside environmentalist groups. It's a major issue in the community, and when I pitched it to students at the end of the previous year, several were excited about it. I had spent the summer planning, coming up with ideas, and that class was something that I was very much looking forward to teaching.

A few weeks later though, I woke up to a series of texts from Mrs. Potter asking if I would teach Accelerated Reader instead. "You have room in your schedule because no one signed up for your elective :)," she writes. For the rest of the summer, through PIR Days and even into the beginning of school, I have to fight for my elective. I have to fight for something that will actually be of value to my students. It would engage them in writing but allow them to advocate for their place. It would make the connections between the work we do in English with real life consequences. Mrs. Potter never seemed all that interested in what I have to say, preferring that I teach Accelerated Reading instead. She won't listen to me and I feel like she's trying to put me in a

teaching box that I've spent years resisting. A new student has come to Savage who doesn't play an instrument. My prep is during band, and so she wants to stick that student with me and AR. I try to convince students to transfer into my class, but I have no luck. It all gives me flashbacks to the year before when I argued against having all high school electives placed into eighth period, noting that with only 22 kids, that would be spreading the numbers out too thin. That warning fell on deaf ears, and I'm stuck babysitting.

My feeling of disconnect happens in other ways too. Near the beginning of the year, with no warning, the locks on our doors are all changed. These new locks require a key to lock, even from the inside. Teachers go to Mrs. Potter to say that this makes it more inconvenient to lock doors in an emergency, but no matter. She says that those types of door knobs, the ones that lock with the quick twist of a knob, allow students to lock teachers out of rooms. To many on staff, this feels like a frivolous concern. It hasn't happened in Savage as far as anyone can tell.

Then, in January, there comes a policy from her that our doors must be shut and locked at all times. Instantly, concerns are raised about how this will disrupt the learning process. Having to stop a lesson to open the door each time someone needs into the room gets old fast. Additionally, the staff worries that students with mental health issues will only see locked doors and no one to help support them. Those of us on the second floor are even more concerned, as there is only one fire escape up there, and it can only be accessed through one classroom.

Mrs. Potter holds a meeting to talk about the policy, but it isn't so much a meeting as a lecture. She tells us, "If you have concerns about this, please come talk to me. Not

now, in this meeting, but later." Many of us feel silenced. On top of that, she informs us, "I'm not the type of person to go around and seek other people's opinions." Off-handedly she adds, "I've made decisions that made over 70 teachers mad before, so this wasn't a big deal." She does allow for our doors to be open, but in the locked position. How this would prevent students from locking teachers out is not explained.

I attend the school board meeting about the door policy a week later. I read a statement from the union opposing the door policy. I, along with three other teachers, explain our frustrations with the process. Mrs. Potter says she held the meeting for us to raise concerns. Not one to usually interrupt the decorum of a meeting, I speak out. "Actually, you told us that you didn't want us to say something in that meeting, only to talk to you privately. A lot of us felt that you actively shut down a chance at dialogue then." She says that she's sorry we felt that way. I don't believe her for a second. The board sides with the teachers, tables the door policy, and things go back to the way they were.

During this process, another teacher encouraged me to go and talk things over with Mrs. Potter; to bring up my concerns with the door policy, with the lack of communication. I am hesitant to do so. It has felt this year that these discussions have not warranted any change, have not yielded any sort of understanding. If I'm going to take the time to go and visit with her, then I want to know, or at least feel, like it will mean something. I know I'm not the only one feeling unheard, and to some degree unwanted. Those of us that have been through a few superintendents want our expertise to be valued, not handwaved away.

Teaching has increasingly become a profession of high turnover. In 2015, NPR reported that over a five-year period, half of new teachers either transfer to another school or leave the field altogether. Nationwide, the search for new teachers costs school districts $2.2 billion. Among the biggest reasons cited for leaving was lack of autonomy in the classroom.

Dr. Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania studies teacher retention. In his interview with NPR, he says, “One of the main factors is the issue of voice, and having say, and being able to have input into the key decisions in the building that affect a teacher's job. This is something that is a hallmark of professions. It's something that teachers usually have little of, but it does vary across schools and it's very highly correlated with the decision whether to stay or leave.” Teachers that are given voice are more likely to stay. Teachers that do not are more likely to move on.

Giving teachers a say is relatively easy at a small school. In Savage, we have one teacher per subject. It isn’t that much effort to include staff in decisions. Administrators can talk all they want about how much they value their staff, and how professional the people they work with are, but they must make sure that those are not simply empty platitudes. At a small school, everyone must chip in to make sure things run well. When teachers have voice, when they are given agency, they are more likely to have a vested stake in the process, more likely to stay.

So, if I feel less valued then before, what keeps me around? Because Savage has become a home.

Kodi and I had been trying to get pregnant for well over a year. We had started trying after our first year in Savage, but with no luck we sought outside help. We were referred to a fertility clinic in Billings. It was a year of monthly trips, a year of racking up hours and miles on the car. We knew the never ceasing miles of I-94 by heart. It was a year of, "Not this time," a year of, "Try this,"; a year of tears, a year of questioning. Every month, we would make the seven-hour round trip to Billings, spend money for a night in a hotel, eat out for meals, stretching our teaching salaries thin, only to hear that it was all for naught. We would have to try again. That was until a trip made in October during my third year of teaching. Our routine was shaken by new words from the doctor. "If it doesn't take this time, we need to explore other options." Those words hung over us as we drove home. We wouldn't know until the end of the week what we would need to do. We made an appointment for November to talk about those other options

On Monday, back in Savage and attempting to return to normalcy, I took attendance and asked if anyone knew where a missing boy was. "Oh, his sister just had her baby. He's at home with her." The sister was a high school dropout, had been my student just the year before. Throughout the day, the girls gushed about how cute the baby was, how they couldn't wait to hold it. All I heard was, "If it doesn't take this time, we need to explore other options."

On Friday, I went over to the school in the afternoon in order to get some grading done before the night's football game. I enjoyed working alone in my room, being able to focus on things. It took my mind off of the pregnancy attempt. I had been working for a few hours when suddenly, Kodi appeared.

"I tried to call you..."

I looked at my phone, sure enough there were several missed calls. My phone had been on silent. "Sorry, I just..."

"I have something to show you." She brought up a picture on her phone. It was a positive pregnancy test.

"Really?"

"Yes!"

We embraced tightly, and the weight of the year, the monthly trips, the negative tests, the tears, was suddenly gone.

"I tried calling you, I went down to Glendive to get a prescription. I've called my mom."

We talked for a while in my classroom about what was next, how we should tell people. As the clock moved towards six, when I would go down to the field and start the clock, we said our good-byes. I floated down to the field, carrying a secret. I was going to be a dad.

When we did tell people, the school community was excited for us. I wrote on my "Now Reading" board that I was reading, *Dude, You're Going to be a Dad!*, which prompted a student to ask, "Why would you be reading that book?"

"Why do you think I would be?"

"Are you...you guys are expecting?"

In February, Kodi and I found out the sex of our baby. I had taken some time off from school to go to the ultrasound, so my students knew it was happening. A few days

after the ultrasound, I went out to lunch after a District Basketball tournament game, when our girls' basketball team walked in. Right away, one of the girls called out, "Mr. Hoffmann, what are you having?"

I smiled. Teenagers are nothing, if not direct. "A girl!" They cheered, happy to have shared in the news and the moment with me.

Throughout the rest of the school year, the girls in particular became increasingly stressed that Kodi and I had not built our nursery. No matter that we were moving houses over the summer. No matter that the baby would sleep in our room when she arrived. They wanted to know more, to be a part of it. I didn't mind sharing the experience with them either.

Zoey was born in the summer, but soon after she was born, we would bring her to ballgames. Zoey would watch intensely during volleyball games, get passed around at basketball games, and would wonder how my voice got so loud when I announced starting line-ups.

At one basketball game, Zoey was starting to get fussy, and Kodi was about to take her home, when one of my students asked if she could hold her. "I'm great with kids," she assured us. Kodi assented. I got busy running the clock, but at a timeout, I glanced over to find Zoey fast asleep on my student's shoulder.

A life had begun here. Our lives changed here. The community and the school helped make that change manageable. A little over two years after Zoey was born, Kodi and I had our second daughter, Abigail. My students celebrated these moments with us. Families brought gifts and food to us when our newborns arrived. They played with our

kids at ballgames. We weren't simply teachers anymore; we were becoming a closer part of the community. Knowing we have that support, that love, it makes it a little easier to bear another winter, a little easier to bear the miles upon miles that stand between myself and family.

CHAPTER EIGHT: FINDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

"Hey everyone, my name is Alan and I am a teacher in northeastern Montana. I teach in Savage and today I am driving all the way across the state to go to a professional development conference in Missoula. I'm going to take the long way, I'm going to take Montana 200, but I kind of wanted to demonstrate just how far rural teachers have to go in order to get decent professional development, especially in Montana. It's 11:02, I'm in Sidney, Montana right now. I've got some snacks, I've got an audiobook, and I'm about ready to embark on Montana-200. So, I'll just be updating you as I go."

I sat in the parking lot of the Sidney Town Pump and waited for the video to upload to Instagram. It was June 24, 2018, a Sunday. The next day, over 500 miles away, the Montana AP Summer Institute would begin in Missoula.

When planning my route across the state, I had decided early on to take Montana-200. The state highway cuts through the center of the state, and while I can't drive as fast on it as I might the interstate, it's more direct path from Sidney to Missoula meant that it would take the same amount of time to drive across the state. I drove on and on, past fields, over rivers, by rolling hills, through forests, over mountains. Throughout the day, I updated my Instagram from Circle, Lewistown, and Great Falls. My desire to get to Missoula and be done with the nine-hour drive overrode my original thoughts of showcasing some small Montana towns and really giving my followers a feel for the length of the drive. There is a sense that I get travelling across the state, that it is somehow unchanged. I often felt as I went across Montana 200, that the landscape looked much like it might have 50 or 100 years ago. The prairies would be here, the mesas

would be here. Other than the modern conveniences of my car, and the road that had seen better days, based on the patchwork of tar, it sometimes felt like stepping back through time. The rural towns do little to dispel this feeling. The storefronts don't seem to have been updated in some time, the houses feel older. The water towers that announce their coming have stood there for years and years. These towns have blended themselves with the Montana landscape: they feel permanent, unchanging, a reminder that I am a transient who will stop only for a moment. I arrived in Missoula just as the sun was beginning to set on a long summer day, with only enough energy to grab some food at a local restaurant before collapsing into bed for the night.

On the one hand, it was exhausting to travel so far to get professional development. On the other hand, as a rural teacher, this felt like it was par for the course. Montana is the fourth largest state, and especially for those of us that are tucked away from the major cities, going to any major event is a process. Even if the annual teacher's convention is in Billings, that's a three- and half-hour drive for me. Oftentimes, it is in Bozeman, Great Falls, or Missoula, all further away, all harder to reach from northeast Montana. This means that more often than not, I simply don't attend. Not attending means not getting renewal credits and not networking with other teachers, something I cherish due to being a one-person department. Oftentimes, there are local events during the teacher's convention, workshops in Glendive or Sidney, but I've found these to be somewhat lacking and limited. To get the good sessions, the worthwhile PD, it's going to cost me a trip to the city, a few nights in a hotel, and paying to eat out for every meal.

Even before this trek to Missoula, I was well-versed in day long journeys for professional development. I have attended the NCTE Conventions in Atlanta and St. Louis. After the Atlanta convention, my flight landed in Billings just after 11:00 PM. I fueled up with an energy drink and made the drive home that night, stopping for a brief nap in a rest area, arriving back in Savage just after 3:30 in the morning, all so that I could teach the next day. However, NCTE is a national convention. Having to travel far for it is somewhat expected. For Montana's rural schools, it can be such a journey just for "localized" professional development.

To combat this somewhat, Montana has moved some of its professional development online. The Teacher's Learning Hub on the OPI[19] website has several courses, both facilitated and self-paced that allow teachers to gain renewal credits. These courses do allow for some connection with other teachers, which is nice. But, there's still something missing from them. There's something about gathering in a room together and working together in the moment, not over discussion posts through the course of a week, that makes learning more engaging. As we get set throughout the country to take learning online for our students due to the COVID-19 outbreak, my background in these courses makes me weary of how effective this will be. Oftentimes, I look back on the renewal

[19] OPI is the Office of Public Instruction, the government agency that oversees public education in the state of Montana.

credits earned from the Learner Hub and can't remember the course or what I learned from it.

In contrast, the AP Summer Institute was highly engaging. Our session was full of lively discussion, back and forth debates on what literary merit meant, ideas on how to prepare students for the AP Exam, resource sharing, and more. It may not be possible for the Learner Hub to capture this energy, but there are ways online formats can do something similar, and that is the Twitter chat.

I first learned about #MTEdchat when I had completed my student teaching. Every Tuesday night educators from across the state would use the hashtag to share ideas, tips, and encourage one another. We weren't in the same room, but it was live and interactive. I took part in many of these chats in my first few years in Savage. Topics ranged from technology in education to self-care for teachers. It is usually not limited to a subject matter or grade level, so everyone from high school English teachers to second grade teachers are part of the chat. It certainly is interesting to see how issues in education are dealt with across that spectrum.

I even had the opportunity to lead one of the #MTEdchats. In April 2015, as I was finishing up my first year of teaching, I led a chat on advice for new teachers. With spring graduations coming, and many new teachers going on the job hunt, I thought it might be a good topic. I asked what teachers wish they had known when they started, what advice they would give to those on the job hunt, how new teachers can ensure they improve their teaching, and what teachers, regardless of experience, still want to learn. It

was fun to see the responses come in, and to witness the discussions take off. Usually, I was only a participant, but leading the chat was an engaging way to take part.

The International Society for Technology in Education touts Twitter chats as a good way for teachers to make connections. On the ISTE Blog, the organization writes, “(Twitter chats are) free. They focus on just the topic you need. They happen regularly. And they give you access to an instant community, complete with networking opportunities, emotional support and the chance to give back.” The article quotes Daniel Krutka, an education professor at the University of North Texas who says, "The collective intelligence of a chat can provide educators with classroom-tested lessons, a variety of perspectives on specific problems or an introduction to emerging technologies." This has been my experience as well. These are low-stakes opportunities to connect with other educators, talk about what I saw in my classroom, and compare notes, as it were, with teachers in other environments. Most states have their own ed chats, as do most subject areas. NCTE runs a twitter chat on Sundays. There is also a Rural Ed Chat on Tuesdays. Other chats, like #DisruptTexts are ways for ELA educators to share resources that challenge the canon and expand the literature we teach to students. All of these chats cut through my isolation and help me feel connected to other teachers.

For awhile, OPI even gave a renewal credit for taking part in #MTEdchat. A teacher who participated could go to a website, fill out a few questions about the chat, and receive one renewal credit. It wasn’t much, but I felt like it was worth it. I learned a great deal from these chats, and made connections with teachers across the state. A few years ago, the state stopped giving renewal credits for the chat, but the chat continues.

My life is busier now, and usually Tuesdays at 8:00, I'm trying to get a toddler to go to bed. But, sometimes, I can chime in for a question or two and still feel a level of engagement and connection with other teachers. Twitter chats can make the isolating nature of teaching a much more connected endeavor.

Professional development is essential to teachers. Through it, we learn of resources. We can crowdsource the issues we face in our classroom. We can learn about something completely new. There have been a handful of times that I have sat in a session at NCTE and jotted down the beginnings of a new unit. But because these trainings can be inaccessible for rural teachers, we lose out on these opportunities often. This is why I am thankful that Montana State University and the Yellowstone Writing Project brought professional development to Savage.

I will detail the partnership between Savage and YWP in the next chapter, but here I will say that one of the biggest reasons why it was a success is that YWP came to us. We were not expected to make pilgrimages to Bozeman. We didn't send off our writing samples to people who would not interact with us. The YWP team of Allison Wynhoff Olsen, Nigel Waterton, Kirk Branch, Peter Strand, and Hali Kirby came to us.[20] They worked with our teachers in our place. They listened to our concerns, or desires.

---

[20] Full disclosure: Drs. Wynhoff Olsen and Waterton served on my graduate committee.

That demonstrated a level of buy-in from YWP that is not evident in other pieces of professional development.

It is not feasible that this happens for every district, but universities, OPI, and other education resources must make an effort to go to rural places. Only by making the flights or drives themselves will they truly see how far away we are, the challenges that we face, and how they can better serve us.

CHAPTER NINE: CELEBRATING WHO WE ARE

When I was a pre-service teacher, cross-curricular activities intrigued me. I was especially fascinated by schools that did massive cross-curricular events. One that stuck with me the most was a school in Maine that learned about wind power in social studies, read *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* in English, designed and built windmills for science, and decorated them for art. It was a blending of learning and teaching that I believe gets at the heart of what education should be.[21] These projects show students how what they learn in one class can be applied to another and help them better their understanding on how all subjects work together to give them a well-rounded view of the world.

Most often, the schools that do these types of projects are large schools, with hundreds of students and resources aplenty. Savage was not one of those schools, but I knew that eventually I would want to try it. Reflecting back on it, I planted the seeds for *The Landscapes of Savage* in my first year.

The first thing that I did was make myself open to cross-curricular activities. I said as much to every high school teacher at the beginning of the year. First-year teachers are idealists and a small school can let you test those ideals. Fully believing in cross-

---

[21] More on this particular project can be found here: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily-videos/expeditionary-learning/

curricular work, I tested the waters. Our science teacher, Jean Hagler, was the first to partner with me. She had a classroom set of the book *Napoleon's Buttons*, which details the history of certain chemical compounds and how they have impacted the world. She didn't have time to teach the whole thing, but could I work something in with my juniors, most of whom took chemistry? I said that I could. I told each member of the class to pick a chapter out of the book and use it as the first step in a research project. At the end of it, they would give a presentation about the chapter and other things learned about the compound they studied. In science, Ms. Hagler would do experiments with those compounds. She was able to utilize the book, I was able to have juniors work on research and presenting skills, and all-in-all, it worked.

The second thing that I did was implement buddy reading. This was based off of my experiences as a student teacher at Harrison. Once a week, during their advisory period, Harrison held Big Cats Little Cats, which was when the high school would go down to the elementary and read with a tutor, or just plain spend time with the younger kids. The program helped strengthen the ties between the upper and lower grades, and gave the whole school a strong community feel. Savage did not have an advisory period, but I asked the elementary teachers if I could bring my classes down once a month to read with their classes.

I loved Buddy Reading. I loved seeing the elementary kids light up when the big kids, the high school athletes they watched every weekend, came to their room. I remember a freshmen boy who normally was not invested in school, giving a great reading of *This Book Has No Pictures*. He brought in different voices, inflections, making

the book come alive for the enraptured second graders. I remember when third graders shared their own writing with my sophomores, showing their work to an entirely new audience. I cherished the time it allowed me to get to know my colleagues in the elementary wing. I felt echoes of the community feeling I had known in Harrison. With time, this could develop into something truly great. Both of these experiences led me to believe that not only could we do a massive cross-curricular project in Savage, but we could include all grades when we did so. What this would look like I had no idea.

And then Ms. Peterson asked me to revamp our school's writing program.

She was of the same mind as I was when it came to our students' writing. It wasn't where it needed to be. So, what if we found something that we could implement K-12 with the aim of strengthening it. In particular, she wanted me to look at Step Up to Writing. I wasn't sure exactly where to start with this. Step Up to Writing has a myriad of online testimonials that praise its name. But, I wanted to dig deeper than that, and I wanted to hear from someone who had used the program. I went to the MSU English Ed Facebook Group for some guidance.

I wrote, "I have been tasked with looking into implementing Step up to Writing for our school district. I was wondering if anyone here has experiences with the program and how it has gone. Or, if anyone has suggestions for a writing program that might work, I'd like that as well. Savage doesn't really have a writing program or curriculum, and so we are trying to figure out a way to help improve writing through all grades. Thank you for your help!"

A few minutes later, one of my professors, Nigel Waterton responded with a warning and some advice. ""I'd avoid it. It's too formulaic....The shameless marketing ploy: if you want to talk about getting someone from the Yellowstone Writing Project to come over & help y'all work up a writing program for your school/district, I know people... But it would be home-grown."

It would be a challenge to do so, but because it was a challenge, I was intrigued. I relayed as much to Ms. Peterson, and she agreed. We could pursue this partnership and see where it went. Boxed programs like Step Up to Writing would still be there if it didn't pan out, but this could prove to be more rewarding.

School-wide writing programs aren't developed overnight. They take many hours of planning, of writing, of driving and flying to come together. That summer, YWP director Kirk Branch hosted a dinner for YWP folks as well as some Savage teachers that were in Bozeman for the Montana Behavioral Institute conference. Together, we drank beer and talked about writing and our students, but also what life was like in Savage. We told stories about floating the canal, we explained six-man football, we talked about sugar beets. We gave a picture of our town. We didn't have a full vision of where this partnership would go, but we knew that our place would be at the center of it.

It was at the end of the next school year, ten months after that backyard meeting, that YWP came to Savage on what amounted to be a fact-finding mission. I helped gather writing samples from all grades for analysis. This brought up some hesitation from several members on staff. They were unsure about giving student work to college professors. There was a touch of the weariness that most rural people feel towards

outsiders. This uneasy feeling only grew when YWP began their meeting with us as they started every meeting: with a writing prompt. I was the only one who knew of this tradition and was not fazed by it, but I could feel a bit of tension in the room. Other teachers moved nervously in seats or looked at each other as if to say, “What is this nonsense?” In the end, we wrote, some teachers even shared, and the meeting shifted focus.

What some had feared would be a takedown of our students’ abilities and our teaching methods was instead a celebration of Savage. The YWP team pointed to the positives they saw in our writing samples. Students that showed creativity, that showed interesting insights. “We know you are doing great things here, we want to build on that,” Kirk explained to us.

YWP wanted to make it a true partnership, and so we formed a local leadership team in Savage. I, along with Amber Henwood, the history teacher, and Cassandra Moos, the art teacher, were the initial members of the leadership team. Our fourth member, third grade teacher Tyrel Shannon joined us the following year when he joined the staff in Savage. The goal of creating a new curriculum was daunting, and we didn’t know where to start. But, as we talked about what we want to accomplish with this project, our focus subtly changed from designing a curriculum to changing the culture about writing.

Our students were not writers. All the YWP celebrations of student work could not change that. There was a fear of writing. Students groan when it is assigned, the work is lackluster, the pride in the work is missing. This apprehension towards writing was felt from the elementary all the way up to the high school. So, if we could normalize writing,

make it integrated into everything, then that might be the key to students no longer fearing it.

The goal crystalized for us when Amber and Cassandra went to a National Writing Project event in New Orleans. YWP had received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for our partnership. While I froze in the December winds of eastern Montana, my two colleagues were busy in New Orleans. They explained to other writing project sites that in our school, we wore many hats, that our teaching lives were often hectic. From that, they knew that any project we did would have to fit into our curriculum. We wouldn't want to add anything big to our workloads. But, we also wanted to celebrate who we were. The possibility was floated that we write, as a school, a book about Savage: its history, its ecology, its culture.

There wouldn't have been time in that year to accomplish it, so we set our sights on crafting an event that would showcase our leadership team's efforts, get the kids excited about writing, and show that working cross-curricular and cross-grade was feasible. Over the course of many more meetings, planning sessions, and brainstorms, we decided that a day of writing was what we wanted to do. To make it more appealing, we dubbed it the Savage Writing Carnival.

Ms. Peterson gave us the last full day of class before summer break for the event. We solicited ideas from the entire K-12 staff on different events we could do: everything from story in a bag, to Mad-libs, to recipes, historical mysteries and more were brought to the table. We made teams of students, so that each team would have at least one member from each grade. We set up a schedule of events. We arranged for YWP to bring prizes

for the kids. We organized a writing marathon. After what seemed an eternity of planning, we were ready.

The night before, I tossed and turned, nervous about the day ahead. For our leadership team, I think this day of writing was also THE coming out party for us to the staff and the community. Yes, they've heard of us, met us, talked with us, but this is when we go live. This is when we can show what we can do. In my head, I saw the number of ways it could go wrong. The weather could force the writing marathon indoors, no one would share their writing, the kids would complain the whole time, teachers would complain the whole time. What little sleep I did get was restless. When the morning arrived, I came to school fueled by high anxiety and coffee. It wasn't just a day at stake, it was years of meeting and planning. It was the test drive to see if our big project could happen next year. The clouds overhead were non-threatening. At school, the rest of the leadership team was in the same state of mind I was in. We hadn't slept well, we were worried about how the day would unfold. I was a bundle of nerves, constantly fidgeting and pacing as I waited for the day to begin. After announcements, we gathered in the gym. The first thing on the agenda was a writing marathon.

I am the emcee for the event. I welcome everyone to the gym and to the writing carnival. Before I get into introductions, I tell everyone gathered to look to the person on their right and say, "You are a writer." The phrase is mumbled nervously through the gym. "Now, look to the person on your left and tell them, 'You are a writer'," There's slightly more confidence this time. "Now, everyone, real loud say, 'I am a writer.'" The

crowd responds. “We are writers, all of us,” I tell them. “And that’s the focus of today, to write, to share, but above all to have fun.”

I introduce our leadership team and the YWP folks who have come up to help. I read letters from Governor Steve Bullock and Senator Jon Tester that declare this to be a Day of Writing in Montana. Then, I divided the students into their groups for the day, and we began the writing marathon. We had selected locations within the school, such as the football field, gym, library, and cafeteria, as well as places off-campus: the outdoor basketball court, a local school museum, and even the bar. Students went around town with notebooks in hand, and simply wrote and shared in their groups. For most, teachers and students alike, this was the first writing marathon they had ever been on. Luckily, the day was nice, the air a bit cool on the May morning, but otherwise perfect weather for a writing marathon.

The next part of the day was the day I was worried about the most. We did a mass share. Students came back together in the gym and share their writing. Our students have a tendency to be shy. They don’t like to publicly speak. They don’t like to take chances. This was one of the things that was discussed at a PIR Day about what we wanted our kids to get out of not only their writing, but their education. And here we would be, asking students to take a massive risk and share their writing. We had allotted 20 minutes for this. I wasn’t sure what to do if no one volunteered.

I had nothing to be afraid of. After I asked if anyone wanted to share, there were a few moments of uncertainty and silence. But then, a first grader raised his hand. He came down, and into the mic, read his writing. “Pacman!” What station this was on the writing

marathon, or what inspired it, I will never know. But “Pacman!” was the start of our sharing, and share the students did. They wrote about the strangeness of writing in front of the bar for a school sanctioned activity, they wrote about seeing the fire trucks. There were observations on being in the school house museum for the first time, reflections from a teacher watching her children play football. At one point, the mic died. It didn’t matter. The kids just spoke louder. They talked about being in Savage, of the self-imposed gender segregation in the lunchroom. In the end, we had to cut short the sharing to get to lunch. We could have shared for an hour.

For the rest of my day, I did mad-libs with groups as they came into my room. I was isolated from the rest of the carnival, but I would talk to the students as they came in. “What all have you done this afternoon? What was it like?” I would ask them. The students answered happily, talking about the stories they had come up with and the writing they had done. They were engaged, excited even. The teachers that came in with the groups were likewise engaged. Even though I couldn’t tell how the rest of the event was going, I began to feel more and more that we had pulled it off.

In a whirlwind of a day, the crushing anxiety had been lifted. I floated down to the commons to oversee the prizes being handed out. After the last event of the carnival, students cashed in tickets they had earned at the various events on prizes such as journals, pens, and posters.I caught up with the rest of the team. They had felt the same way, the day was a success. The YWP team congratulated us, Ms. Peterson called the day an overwhelming success. When the day was done and the students had left, I floated home, still elated from the day, and promptly crashed asleep on my couch.

We had a brief meeting on the last day of school to debrief on the event. The rest of the staff gave us feedback, mostly on logistical aspects such as giving enough time between events and organizing lunches. We had won them over. We talked a little about how we wanted to build on that day, use it as a springboard into our project for the next school year when we would write about our community. Ms. Peterson gave our team the September PIR day to really launch our project.

Over the summer, a few weeks after Zoey was born, YWP came up to our area once again for a writing retreat. We gathered at the Yellowstone-Missouri Confluence Center for two days to really plan the book. We thought if we could get teachers to adapt a lesson they did to fit into the history or culture of Savage, that we might get more buy-in. For instance, a lesson in biology could touch on the local ecosystem. Or, younger students could hear from a long-time resident of town and learn its history. We did not want the teachers to do any extra work, just to give us one lesson that we could use for the book.

Additionally, Amber had received a grant from the Montana Historical Society to research the history of Savage. She brought back countless pages and documents about the small town: oral histories from residents, the history of the canal, historical maps of the town, and more. It would prove to be a valuable resource to any teacher wanting to back up their work.

We also planned out our PIR Day, what sort of things we would cover. We would go over interviewing techniques so that our colleagues could go back and teach their students how to interview people in town. We planned a lesson on photo analysis. We

would go through the resources. We wanted to ensure that the PIR Day was a beneficial use of everyone's time. We left the writing retreat feeling very confident about the year ahead, blissfully unaware of how a scheduling conflict was going to undo a lot of the goodwill we had built up during the carnival.

At the end of the school year, Savage had purchased a writing curriculum from Pearson called Ready-Gen. YWP warned against doing this, citing that it was highly scripted and reduced teacher autonomy. But despite that (I believe because of that) warning, the elementary teachers wanted the program. It was a fairly intensive program that required training. Ms. Peterson had promised the teachers they would receive said training during the September PIR day.

We were already expecting some resistance to our project. Asking for a day of writing was one thing. To work towards a book was orders of magnitude bigger. Even if what we were asking each teacher was, we thought, relatively small, it was still a big deal. However, we were blindsided by the scheduling conflict and the feelings towards it. One elementary teacher told Tyrel that our project was, "A fucking waste of time." Catching wind that another writing marathon was planned, this time with a discussion of the benefits of writing marathons and how they might be utilized in different classes, was met with threats to walk out of the meeting if we forced people to share their writing.[22]

---

[22] This was an unfounded fear, as with all Writing Project activities, the sharing of writing is encouraged but never forced. Doing so would break the feeling of community that these events create.

We proceeded. I was as nervous about the PIR day as I was the day of writing. The stakes were higher, and now the audience was not students, but my fellow staff members. If this went south, it could derail the book and also lead to fractures within the staff.

I started the day off with a writing prompt, asking teachers what their Savage story was. This was what we were thinking for the title of the project, and so we thought it fitting. Some teachers had grown up in Savage and were able to talk about growing up here. Others wrote about moving here, or what it was like to teach here. Everyone had different perspectives on Savage. This was the point of it. Even though we are a small community, we are still a diverse community. We shared writing, and I felt, or maybe hoped I felt, the ice beginning to thaw.

We moved through our scheduled activities, yes, even the writing marathon. No one walked out. We gave teachers time to brainstorm and plan ideas for the project, and there were several good ones. One elementary class proposed comparing the prices of goods from the records shown in a resource to the price today as part of a math lesson. Our music teacher thought he could have students arrange a song around the words of a local poet. Others were interested in oral histories. We set a deadline for March for things to be turned in so that we could organize it and get it printed. We left the day feeling better about where we were going. We knew some resentment still lurked because of the missed Ready-Gen training, but I hoped that the overarching goals of the project, of bringing together the whole school, would overcome that.

For my part, my seniors wrote essays on what is like to live in Savage. My favorite piece of writing in the entire anthology was from a senior boy who railed against how much time and energy was invested into sports at the school. He had been scared to write it, to share it, but I'm glad he did. It was a reminder that not everyone shared in the rah-rah enthusiasm of sports and it was great to have a piece that questioned our community's priorities in our book that celebrated Savage. Other classes did multi-genre projects on the town. Others interviewed family members. As other projects were completed and turned in from other teachers, the leadership team practically wore out the school scanner digitizing the work of all the students. We wanted to finish up the book by April so that it could be printed and be ready in time for our annual Spring Extravaganza.[23] As the deadline neared, I was acutely aware that I was becoming a bad teacher. I would get students going on work and then focus on the book, formatting pictures, getting things in order, making it just right so that it could be sent off. Finally, after hours and hours of work compiling the 392 page document, I hit submit. Then, mostly for my benefit, I printed the whole book on the school's printer.

The next morning, with the energy of a zealot, I went around to the staff to show them. "This is what we worked for! This is our book!" I felt a recognition from some for the first time, that their work had been towards something. Nearly 400 pages of work

---

[23] We self-published through Amazon.

cannot just be ignored. It was the years of work, the hours of planning, the convincing, the prodding, the pleading. “This is what our students, what we are capable of!”

In the end, the book was not ready for Spring Extravaganza. Amazon felt that we did not own the copyright to the work included in *The Landscapes of Savage*, and by the time clarifying emails had been exchanged, the books would not be available for purchase until a few weeks after school ended. Still, we were able to show the proofs of the book to the crowd. Members of the community leafed through it, intrigued by what we had done.

During the evening’s events, Ms. Peterson asked me to recount the story of our team. But, it was a long night, and so I cut to the end. “We wrote a book!” I said, holding a copy of one of the proofs above my head. “This book is a celebration of our school and our writing. It isn’t always perfect, it isn’t always polished, but it is real and sincere,” I told the crowd. “This book is us.”

Ultimately, the book didn’t sell well. But, it never was about selling copies of the book. It was about changing the culture of writing at our school, about showing our students what was possible. For me, it was about showing that we could do something big at our school. Savage is a small school. It lacks the resources that larger districts enjoy. But, with hard work, dedicated staff, good administration, and student buy-in, we were capable of achieving something truly great.

CHAPTER TEN: LESSONS FROM RURAL

In the spring of my fifth year of teaching, Zoey developed a sty in her left eye. We went to the eye doctor, tried some treatments, but it just wouldn't go away. We are referred to a specialist in Bismarck, North Dakota, over 200 miles and 3 hours away. That specialist, in turn, referred us to a cornea specialist in Rapid City, South Dakota, over 300 miles and nearly five hours away. Zoey hated these appointments and was traumatized as optometrists used a device to keep her eye open. She screamed in protest. The doctors told Kodi and I that she doesn't have any vision in one eye, which we don't believe but are nonetheless devastated to hear. The traveling, the screaming child, the knowledge that another baby is coming, and the end of the year push left me exhausted. I felt like a shitty teacher. I was gone all the time, and when I was there my mind is elsewhere. My afternoon classes especially suffered. I sat at my desk more. The students picked up on me running out the clock. The quality of their work went down, and my care level went along with it.

Living in a rural place does have its difficulties, and it would be naive to write a memoir about teaching in a place like Savage and not, at the very least, bring them up. The above is one example. Health care in rural places can be a major concern. When specialists are frequently hundreds of miles away, placing the burden of travel and lodging on those who seek care and it adds another challenge into what is already a stressful situation. And much like rural schools face shortages with teachers, so do rural hospitals with physicians. According to Roger A. Rosenblatt and L. Gary Hart, while

20% of Americans live in rural spaces, only 9% of doctors practice there. The percentages for specialists, as Kodi and I found out first-hand, is even lower.

In addition, things like the Internet run slower here. Pew Research reported in May 2019 that, "Rural Americans are now 12 percentage points less likely than Americans overall to have home broadband." Additionally, rural residents are less likely to own devices that can bring them online, and many lack access to the Internet all together. The article notes:

> These comparably low levels of adoption among rural residents may be due to a unique feature of rural life. Even though rural areas are more wired today than in the past, other research shows that substantial segments of rural America still lack the infrastructure needed for high-speed internet, and what access these areas do have tends to be slower than that of nonrural areas.

This obviously impacts schools. Schools, who can find it difficult to find the funds to keep up with technology as it is, are frequently bugged with slow Internet. We regularly suffer days where the Internet lags, frustrating teachers and students alike who increasingly rely on such technology for research. Despite that reliance on technology, Savage has not employed an on-site tech person since I have been there, and Internet providers can be slow to send out someone for repairs or maintenance, usually because those they have employed to do so are already stretched thin. Their small staffs have many miles to cover to service the small towns the make up their coverage map. All of this leads to delays and frustration.

In the 21st Century, the Internet means access to opportunity, to commerce, to information. Without those things, it may not be any wonder that people are leaving rural places in droves. We feel this decline in our own school where currently only one class in our K-12 is larger than 10 kids. With the potential closure of an area mine and energy production slowdowns already occurring in the Bakken region, questions about enrollment and even the school's survival creep up.

In August 2018, I attended the International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE) in Bozeman. Nearly every talk I attended began with a disclaimer that the presenter did not want to talk about rural from a "deficiency perspective", i.e. what rural did not have. They wanted to focus on the positive, what rural can do, and the opportunities there. While I can see this viewpoint, I also believe that those in rural studies must talk about those deficiencies, make noise, and pressure policy makers to find solutions. They should do so because rural, if afforded the same playing field as urban and suburban places, could do so much more. Perhaps by investing in rural, policy makers, especially in education, would not view these sparsely populated places as quirks, but rather places with something to offer.

I do not mean to paint rural places in a negative light, and I believe that the ISFIRE attendees actively worked to avoid doing this. But, I do want to acknowledge that rural places face challenges. It is difficult to live here; it is challenging to teach here. Considering that most new teachers in Montana will come to rural places, we must have frank discussions about what it means to go to a place like Savage. It can be easy to look at these challenges and wonder why it is worth it, why would we want to go there? The

answer is because these places give new teachers excellent opportunities to become great teachers.

It begins with relatively small class sizes. One of the things that keeps me in Savage is our small numbers. I know that I'll have a more than manageable class size, with my average number of students per class being between 6-8. Contrast this with the reports of some schools cramming 30, even 40, kids into a classroom with one teacher. The thought of all that grading makes me shudder. Given what we know about best education practices, this classroom size is not ideal. With larger class sizes, kids are more likely to slip through the cracks. Students that are at-risk are more likely to slip into a back corner, not participate, and not engage. As class sizes go up and up, the education system runs the very real risk of leaving students behind, simply because there is no reasonable way for a teacher to account for everyone. In a system where high school teachers get 50 minutes with each class, finding time to teach to 40 different people is nearly impossible. It stands to reason that smaller class sizes would help teachers be more effective, and ensure that no student slips through the cracks.

There is research to back this up. In 2011, the Brookings Institution looked at the literature around class reduction and found that smaller class sizes work:

> The most influential and credible study of CSR is the Student Teacher Achievement Ratio, or STAR, study which was conducted in Tennessee during the late 1980s. In this study, students and teachers were randomly assigned to a small class, with an average of 15 students, or a regular class, with an average of 22 students. This large reduction in class size (7 students, or 32 percent) was found to increase student achievement by an amount equivalent to about 3 additional months of schooling four years later.

A quarter of a year gained by reducing the class size is significant. Granted, there are a lot of factors that go into student achievement, very little of it a school can control. There is very little a school can do about a student's socioeconomic position, about a student's home life, on whether or not there is food at home, if parents are supportive, if things are stable. One of the most common criticisms of the data-driven education reform movement is that it does not take these factors things into account. Schools may not be able to change a students' home life but they can make an effort to reduce classroom sizes. Doing so could be one piece of the puzzle to ensuring that students receive the education they need. Further, it stands to reason that children who do need services and additional support are more likely to stand out in a class of 15 than they would a class of 40.

To accomplish this, it would take a massive investment in the educational framework of the country. It will also require new teachers. Given that there are fewer and fewer people entering the teaching field, this provides a problem. However, if the way we treat teachers changes, this too could reverse course. Again, rural provides a solution.

As written before, I believe that at a small school, everyone must chip in to make the school operate. This means helping out at ballgames and advising classes. It can also mean helping to draft school policy and share input on long-term goals. If teachers are given a say in how their school operates and what priorities it has, they are more likely to stick around. In 2018, Robert Bruno of the Harvard Business Review point blank asks

when America stopped seeing teachers as professionals. Writing about teacher strikes, Bruno opines on the cause of them and believes that it is way more than just pay that is causing teachers to strike; it is a systematic attack on public education. Teachers are rebelling against a prioritization of charter schools, of demands to teach to tests, of the increased use of data in schools. Bruno writes, "Teachers are seeing their own experience be devalued by policymakers and other officials with little experience in the education field, and it's not improving the education of their students. In other words, and as others have noted, teachers are balking at the erosion of their status as professionals." At a small school, where everybody must do their part to give our students the best education possible, our professionalism must be valued. Teachers must be listened to.

In rural schools, teachers can easily be brought to the table as stakeholders. In Savage, it is common for the school board to ask for teacher's opinions on items on their agenda during meetings. With the right administrator, things such as discipline policy can be created by teachers, to ensure that it fits within their best practices and the school culture. In Savage, it was teachers that came up with our ineligibility policy. We knew our failing students needed more time and support to get things done, so we instituted an after-school study hall for those that were ineligible. While the administration and school board approved it, the bulk of the work was teacher driven, knowing what would work for our students and also for us as teachers. What prevents this from happening at larger school districts?

The COVID-19 outbreak once again gave Savage a chance to shine. While teachers across the country fretted about moving online and district mandates on what

they had to do, the Savage administration made it clear that they trusted teacher judgement. We were encouraged to teach new material, but how we graded it, what we did with missing assignments, and the rigor of said assignments was left to us. “You are professionals, I trust you,” Mrs. Potter told us in a staff meeting, conducted over Google Hangout. It was refreshing to know that I had leeway and discretion to deal with whatever arose during this unprecedented time.

I recognize that making these changes will be hard. It will take time, effort, and money to reduce classroom sizes. It will take time and energy to convince administrators and school boards that their teachers deserve agency and autonomy. It is difficult to change trends that have been in motion for years. But, when it comes to education, nothing less than this nation’s future is riding on it. Is that not worth the investment? With more (and better funded) schools and more (and better paid) teachers, education could be seen with more esteem. In turn, we can ensure that America’s students are able to compete in our globalized society. However, these benefits cannot be hoarded only by urban places or where property taxes create wealthy schools. These benefits and opportunities must go everywhere. It may be easy to write-off rural places, and certainly governments seem to do a good job of doing that. But, I firmly believe that when it comes to education, we are all in this together. A rural child that receives a substandard education as a result of lack of opportunity does no one any favors. A rural child’s education is just as important as an urban or suburban child. Accomplishing this equity will take time, effort, and thinking outside the box, but a child’s educational opportunities should not be limited by property values of the town they grow up in.

Rural has provided a blueprint for a better way forward, in spite of the challenges that we face here. In turn, a renewed investment in rural and rural schools can keep that going. Without that investment, it isn't hard to see what could happen. Montana's Hi-line is already dotted with boarded up schools from towns. In Savage, our irrigation system is under constant threat, and a local coal mine may close down as well. Without investment in something new, without investment in us, we can only speculate as to what may become of our school and our community. Rural is a place that should be replicated and replenished, not ignored into obscurity.

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Each year at the rural education colloquium and job fair, students mill about one of the giant conference rooms in Montana State University's SUB. Small schools from across the state are there. Several schools from Savage's district make the drive: Richey, Culbertson, Bainville, and Medicine Lake. During this, administrators for these schools often chat about how hard it is to get new teachers interested in their schools.[24] As they do so, they might cast a disapproving glance at the table that Bozeman School District sets up. There's never a shortage of teacher candidates wanting to talk to Bozeman. Given that Montana State has organized this event to help the state's rural schools, I do not believe it's fair that Bozeman is here. But, they are the hometown school and have a strong relationship with the university.

I don't blame the pre-service teachers for showing interest in Bozeman. Bozeman is one of the best supported school districts in the state of Montana. It is located in a university town, where student expectations are high. Bozeman School District wins awards. Furthermore, many pre-service teachers have done coursework in the district. They student-taught there, or observed, or interviewed a teacher. Bozeman is familiar. Many believe that they will be able to get into the Bozeman School District. If not, they

---

[24] I feel fortunate that I've been able to tag along on these excursions. I think rural places would be better served if they sent teachers to these so that they can attest to what it's like to teach. Plus, we like to get out of town too.

can sub. They can do that and build their resume that way, and next year, surely Bozeman will hire them.

This is wrong and misguided. Subbing is not the same as real teaching. It involves none of the lesson or unit planning or the day to day decisions that go into teaching. My best guess is that these preservice teachers that will sub are passed over the next year when Bozeman makes its hires, by teachers with experience leading a classroom.

Those pre-service teachers shouldn't worry though. There is no shortage of schools that would be willing to give them a place to begin their teaching career. They just may have to do a bit of driving to get there.

One year, at this event, the superintendent from one of the schools laid out the case for the preservice teachers in the room. He said, "Come to our school. You get experience. Maybe you coach a little, learn to drive bus, you build your resume. And after a few years, if you want to move to a bigger school, like Bozeman, we'll help you." Much like schools take on resources to help their best and brightest students escape rural places, schools give opportunities for teachers to develop their skills before moving on. And, it beats subbing. The experience gained is incredible. You will find out your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, you will begin your career.

This isn't to say teaching in a rural place isn't challenging. Teaching is an isolating profession to begin with. Many of us like to close our doors and get to work with our classes, undisturbed by the noises in the hallway or from elsewhere in the school. Rural teaching often adds layers to this isolation. For me, as a one-person

department, I am cut off from other English teachers, other people who know what it's like to try to teach literature, the intricacies of teaching writing.

Further, rural communities face challenges that are often overlooked by society at large. Rural places are bleeding population, resulting in communities and schools that are often on the brink of closure. Globalization has largely left rural behind, and the consequences of this cannot be understated. If issues surrounding rural areas and rural education are not resolved, the result will be millions of children being left behind in the 21st Century. There are no simple solutions to this, and there is no one person or entity that can fix it. Ensuring that rural places not only survive but thrive during this time should be the work of many people and organizations. I would like to conclude this memoir by giving a call to action for the various stakeholders in rural education.

I feel that the work will begin with teachers. Teachers coming into rural places should recognize the power of the place they are in. Encourage students to advocate for themselves and their place. Encourage students to come back to rural areas and make their livings here. Most importantly, don't use rural as merely a steppingstone to something bigger. Invest in your school and community, invest in the relationships you develop here.

Administrators, support your teachers. New teachers coming into rural areas should be allowed to find what works for them, to find their way. Especially if these new teachers are de facto department heads, it will benefit the school in the long run if those teachers can try their new ideas and find what works for their students. Scripted instruction and teaching to a test do not work and doing so can only serve to hurt rural

students. Encourage educators to utilize place-based instruction and support them as they do so.

Citizens of rural places need to recognize too that their places are in danger of being left behind. For their children's sake, they should begin to attend parent-teacher conferences, be more supportive of academics, and do their part to ensure that local economies have room to diversify. There are challenging times ahead for rural, but no one is served if action on economic diversification is delayed. Rural residents and parents must take this time to act, not just to preserve rural places, but to improve them.

Colleges and teacher education programs must do more to prepare their teachers for life in rural areas. A symposium at the end of the year does not do rural places justice. For colleges in states like Montana and Wyoming, where one-person departments are frequent, the infusion of rural and rural education must be more frequent to better prepare students for this task, and also to make rural education more appealing for students. In recent years, Montana State University has engaged in a rural education practicum. The program brings students into rural places for a week, giving them hands-on experience in these settings. Programs like this should be expanded. Courses focused on the pedagogy of place should be included in the college curriculum. The more teacher training programs can do to prepare students for rural, the better off everyone will be.

Governments must do their part as well. Federal, state and local governments must step up and protect our way of life and the lands we work on. Government must also ensure that money comes to rural places. School boards need to ensure that their schools are funded well and that their teachers are paid well enough to make a living in the area.

State governments need to not just look after major population centers, but the little towns and burgs that dot the map. Federally, the challenge is much the same. Ensure that rural places survive, that the residents here are heard.

All that said, rural places are also great places to begin a career as a teacher. Rural allows for a teacher to have more one-on-one time with students. Because of that, disciplinary issues are lower. I do not have the experience in a large school to compare it with but building a classroom community is not merely a goal in a rural place, but something that can come about with relative ease. A dedicated teacher will know their students and make each one, regardless of background or ability, welcome into his or her classroom.

I have tried not to sugarcoat the issues that face rural places. There are challenges here. But there are rewards as well. I have found a home, a calling. My hope is that others will take up that call and continue the work of uplifting rural places and rural students.

During the Covid-19 outbreak that shut down schools across the nation, I felt it might be appropriate for my students to examine and celebrate the place that they live. I assigned a multi-genre project that focused on their relationship with the community. In online meetings, emails, rough drafts, I see the projects taking place: opinion pieces about the importance of the canal, maps of the backroads that surround the town, advertisements for paddlefish season, personal narratives on what it's like to grow up here, and more. They are cognizant though of the challenges we face. They know all too well the thin line that our community walks. That too is reflected in their writings. The

kids seem excited about the project, about getting to share their knowledge of this place with others. I am excited to read their works, their celebrations.

In their voices, I feel the love they have for this place. I recognize my love of this place as I talk to them about living here. We have our triumphs, we have our challenges, but in a place like Savage, we do it together.

REFERENCES CITED

Brown, David L, and Kai A Schafft. *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience & Transformation*. 2nd ed., Polity, 2019.

Bruno, Robert. "When Did the U.S. Stop Seeing Teachers as Professionals?" *Harvard Business Review*, 20 June 2018, hbr.org/2018/06/when-did-the-u-s-stop-seeing-teachers-as-professionals.

Carr, Patrick J., and Maria J. Kerfalas. *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America*. Beacon Press Books, 2009.

Chingos, Matthew M., and Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst. "Class Size: What Research Says and What It Means for State Policy." *Brookings*, Brookings, 10 May 2017, www.brookings.edu/research/class-size-what-research-says-and-what-it-means-for-state-policy/.

Cromatie, John. "Rural Areas Show Overall Population Decline and Shifting Regional Patterns of Population Change." USDA ERS - Rural Areas Show Overall Population Decline and Shifting Regional Patterns of Population Change, USDA, 5 Sept. 2017, https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2017/september/rural-areas-show-overall-population-decline-and-shifting-regional-patterns-of-population-change/.

Doak, Chase. "From Kremlin Foxes to Outlook Blue Jays, Many Montana Teams Have Gone the Way of the Dodo." *406 MT SPORTS*, Billings Gazette, 6 Mar. 2019, 406mtsports.com/high-school/basketball/from-kremlin-foxes-to-outlook-blue-jays-many-montana-teams/article_f2c0337f-c999-58c7-b423-3dec27687e73.html.

Fingal, Diana. "40 Education Twitter Chats Worth Your Time." *ISTE*, 16 Jan. 2018, www.iste.org/explore/Professional-development/40-education-Twitter-chats-worth-your-time.

Goodwin, Bryan. "Research Says / New Teachers Face Three Common Challenges." *New Teachers Face Three Common Challenges - Educational Leadership*, ACSD, http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may12/vol69/num08/New-Teachers-Face-Three-Common-Challenges.aspx.

Grossman, Samantha. “Highest Rent in United States In Williston North Dakota, Not New York.” *Time*, Time, 18 Feb. 2014, time.com/8731/highest-rent-in-us-williston-north-dakota/.

Hagerty, Ryan. “Pallid Sturgeon.” *Defenders of Wildlife*, 8 May 2018, defenders.org/wildlife/pallid-sturgeon.

Knight, Heather and Joacquain Palomino. “Teachers priced out: SF educators struggle to stay amid costly housing, stagnant salaries. San Francisco Chronicle. 13 May 2016. Retrieved 6 September 2019. Online.

Loewus, Liana. “Are Teacher Housing Perks a Good Idea? Some Questions Whether Providing Housing for Teachers is Sound Public Policy.” *Education Week*, vol. 37, no. 18, Jan. 2018, pp 18-21.

MHSA. “2018-19 Montana High School Spring Enrollment By Size”. 2019. PDF.

Perrin, Andrew. “Digital Gap between Rural and Nonrural America Persists.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 31 May 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/.

Phillips, Owen. “Revolving Door Of Teachers Costs Schools Billions Every Year.” *NPR*, NPR, 30 Mar. 2015, www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/03/30/395322012/the-hidden-costs-of-teacher-turnover.

Ripley, Amanda. “The Case Against High-School Sports.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 19 Feb. 2014, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/10/the-case-against-high-school-sports/309447/.

Rosenblatt, R A, and L G Hart. “Physicians and rural America.” *The Western journal of medicine* vol. 173,5 (2000): 348-51. doi:10.1136/ewjm.173.5.348

Savage Public School. “Savage Public School Strategic Plan” .DOCX. 2016.

Sparks, Sarah D. “Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter.” *Education Week*, 2 Apr. 2020, www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/13/why-teacher-student-relationships-matter.html.

Stegner, Wallace Earle. *The American West as Living Space*. Univ. of Michigan Press, 2009.

Stein, Perrin. “Affordable housing for Big Sky teachers moves forward” Bozeman Daily Chronicle. 19 June, 2019. Retrieved 5 September 2019. Online.

Tieken, Mara Casey. *Why Rural Schools Matter*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

Tulenko, John. “‘Expeditionary Learning’ Builds Problem-Solving Skills for Real Life.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 8 May 2013, www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily-videos/expeditionary-learning/.

Tulchin, Ben, et al. “Polling Finds Strong Support For Pallid Sturgeon Recovery in Montana.” PDF. 24 Apr. 2018.

Walker, Tim. “Teacher Autonomy Declined Over Past Decade, New Data Shows.” *NEA Today*, 28 Jan. 2016, neatoday.org/2016/01/11/teacher-autonomy-in-the-classroom/.

Wuthnow, Robert. *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*. Princeton University Press. 2013.

Wuthnow, Robert. *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America*. Princeton University Press, 2018.