

Excellence

EDUCATION



TEACHERS
WHO HAVE
A PASSION
FOR
CHILDREN



in Education

Perhaps at no other time in the nation's history is education more at the forefront than it is now. Educational initiatives are at the top of the list for many state and national representatives, and new technology is constantly changing the way teachers teach and the way students learn.

At NNU, preparing teachers has been a high priority from the beginning. Nearly 100 years later, education majors make up a large percentage of the undergraduate and graduate student population, and many students who first graduate in another discipline return to NNU to later obtain their teaching credentials.

As a profession, teaching is growing in size, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The number of teachers in both public and private schools is expected to grow between 2001 and 2013 in response to population growth. Nowhere is that need as evident as it is in the Treasure Valley, where recent population growth has spawned dozens of new schools, some within blocks of each other. Chair of the Education Department Karen Blacklock said that preparing teachers who are not only qualified teachers, but teachers who have a passion for children and for teaching has been, is and will continue to be paramount in the program.

Along with the high interest and need for undergraduate education degrees, demand has grown for NNU's graduate degrees, as well. Forty-one percent of teachers in public schools hold a master's degree and 30 percent at private schools have earned their master's. Recent technology has allowed many students to continue or start their education online, and NNU recently unveiled its online Master of Education degree in reading to meet the needs of students interested in pursuing online graduate education.

Area principals and administrators speak highly of NNU's program and the graduates they have hired. "In this day and age of accountability and quality instruction it is critical that we hire teachers who have solid expertise in their content area and have impeccable character," said Mark Vierskovier, administrator of student services with the Kuna School District.

"It has been my experience that teachers coming out of NNU possess these qualities. NNU offers excellent teacher education coupled with clearly defined expectations for high integrity, respect of children, and a committed work ethic. NNU is always



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE PAUL
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my first choice when it comes to teacher recruitment," he said.

Principal Mike Cunningham agreed. "I have found that the graduates from NNU are extremely well prepared. They go through quite a rigorous curriculum by the time they are student teaching, and I've found them to be well-organized, articulate, eager to learn, with extremely good people skills and a good knowledge of how people learn and what they need in order to excel to the next level," Cunningham said.

The "rigorous curriculum" Cunningham refers to helps build confidence and skills in beginning teachers, according to Blacklock and NNU Director of Student Teaching Ron Marley. "There's so much consistency in supervision," Blacklock said, adding that one of the keys to the success of NNU student teachers is the mentor relationship they share with supervisors and the constant coaching and support they receive.

Marley also added that the 100 hours of field experience students go through before they begin teaching also helps them feel comfortable and confident in a classroom once their student teaching begins.

Ask Blacklock to name a qualified teacher who has graduated from NNU in recent years, and the list will be long! She speaks with obvious pride in NNU's education students and praises them for success and dedication.

At the top of the recognition list this year is alumnus Steve Wyborny, who was named Oregon Teacher of the Year last fall. Steve, who teaches fifth grade at Nyssa Elementary in Nyssa, Ore., said that his decision to teach came after his initial college graduation when he realized that his passion truly was to be in a classroom.

Surrounded by teachers his entire life, Steve said that claiming teaching as his own meant first graduating with a degree in English and then returning to NNU to pursue both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in education. (Both of Steve's parents, along with his brothers Hank and Chuck, are teachers.)

The decision, at that point, was his own, not just the path paved for him by his teaching family. "I moved back to Nampa and enrolled again," he said of the experience, "but this time with an extraordinary level of freedom and drive."

"I was excited about the possibility of becoming a teacher, and I truly felt privileged that I had the opportunity to make the attempt."

Ten years later, Steve is a model to other teachers across the nation and teaches and inspires others to find the passion he has found. By learning to use PowerPoint effectively in his classroom, Steve said that his students engage in as many as 40 distinct objectives with success in a given lesson. "This approach has been very valuable for my students, and even while I was just beginning to understand it, I recognized that it had the potential for impacting students far beyond the walls of my classroom," he said.

Steve believes that his use of 21st-Century technology to



create a powerful interactive tool, coupled with his desire to share that knowledge with other teachers, is one of the reasons he was chosen to receive the highest honor in his state.

"I understood the reality that while there are many powerful practices taking place in our schools today, teachers rarely have a substantial opportunity to gather the greatness from one another's practice," Steve said. "I decided that I was going to take the best of what I had learned and share it with other teachers who might be able to benefit from it."

Being able to be that positive voice is what Steve said he appreciates most about his recent honor. "Connecting teachers directly with teachers has been very important to me, and that is why I decided to take a risk and say, 'This is the part of what I am learning that I believe could impact students outside of my own classroom.'"

On a personal level, taking risks has become very important to him, he said, especially as he deals with the daily complications of epilepsy – especially the fact that he does not drive – and the challenges that come from pushing himself to be a life-long learner. "I've learned that I have to take an active part in my own future. It's easy to take on the mindset that you are going to do your best in life, but I understand now that it's more important to actively shape your future than it is to

concentrate on becoming the best that you can be at any one thing," he said.

Married to Jeannine Howard since 1994, Steve has two children, Benjamin, who is 7, and Natalie, 4. Steve said his wife has been called "an angel on earth," and was quick to agree. "Jeannine is an amazing person, and an absolute Godsend to me," he said, praising her for her support and love, and especially with the way she helps him cope with his disability.

"I've come to realize that when you face realities you can't change, you can either bang your head against the wall or start seeking areas where you can make a difference. I think that accepting my limitations has helped me understand other people much better. The more I talk with people, the more convinced I am that everyone has some defining challenge in their life. How you let the challenge define you is in your own hands. I'm truly fortunate that my challenge is so obvious to me," he said.

Steve also looks to his faith for answers and support. "Jesus Christ is the Lord and savior of my life," he said. "This reality impacts everything I do. My faith provides my identity and colors my life. My faith leads me, and it demands that I respond to the Lord's leading."

On the walls of Steve's classroom above the windows are several dozen pages printed out, each with a separate "Big Idea." Big Idea #12 reads: "What seems impossible now may soon be possible."

Look at the faces of Steve's students and you'll see the obvious hope of the impossible becoming possible. But for



Steve, his calling as a teacher is more than just what goes on in his classroom, more than inspiring 37 fifth graders to take risks and go deeper in their learning. "Teaching is an enormously important job," he said. "The quality of the education that we provide to our students today instantly defines

us as a nation. Our levels of self-respect and passion are all spotlighted by the priority that we place on education today."

With this recent honor, Steve said his schedule is busier than ever. In January, he flew to Dallas to meet with other teachers chosen from their states to receive this honor. In April, Steve will travel to Washington, D.C., to meet with President and Mrs. Bush in the Oval Office, and in August, he will attend Space Camp in Huntsville, Ala., where they will simulate a shuttle mission and Steve will get to work in mission control and the shuttle. "Not bad for a guy who can't drive," Steve quipped.

Most importantly, Steve said that he will have the opportunity to listen to the perspective of others and sees this opportunity as another chance to make his own reality. "Like many other things in life, this entire experience will be defined by me," he said. "Truly, it will be whatever I make of it."