



First-year teachers adapt to big changes in the spring

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More than 100 new educators and district staff members joined Idaho Falls School District 91 and Bonneville Joint School District 93 at the beginning of this school year. Some were hired straight out of college and others transferred from other districts, but changes caused by the coronavirus mean that none of them will get to finish their first year of the new job in person.

"It was hard at first. I felt like the sure footing I had found through the year was ripped out from under me," Thunder Ridge High School math teacher JaNeil Jones said.

Another new teacher, Lakeisha Johnson, grew up in Idaho Falls and graduated from Idaho Falls School District 91. After spending a few years working for school districts in Utah on early childhood intervention outside of the classroom, she was one of five new teachers hired at Hawthorne Elementary School this year for her first experience teaching.

All 29 of the preschoolers that Johnson teaches have Individualized Education Programs

because of their need for special education. Earlier this school year she focused on social interaction with her students, using music to teach the kids as a group before working one-on-one with students on the areas where they most needed help.

Keeping up that level of individual attention to each student while working from home means creating videos for the whole class, sending packets that students can then work on separately and constant communication with parents.

It's a big task for any teacher, especially one completing their first year in a classroom.

"I'm not able to physically be there helping them and observing and assessing what they do, so it's obviously not as effective," Johnson said.

Johnson's classes and lessons are posted online using SeeSaw, an online learning platform that she and the other preschool teachers at Hawthorne thought would be user-friendly. She uploads one or more short videos a day with lessons; on Tuesday it was about comparing the shapes, sizes and colors of different objects.

Some material is still prepared in print form for families



SAMANTHA COOK

Thunder Ridge algebra teacher Samantha Cook

that don't have reliable internet or have children who prefer to work on paper. Johnson said that many of the preschoolers are surprisingly good at using computers or tablets to learn online, which has helped make the transition easier for her as well.

"There are new skills I picked up, like finding resources to use or being able to teach in a different way than I normally would, that are making me more well-rounded," Johnson said.

Jones and Samantha Cook are both first-year teachers who came straight from college to teach math at Thunder Ridge. Both said the support from oth-

er teachers that they felt when coming into the district last fall has continued as they switched to online classes and planning sessions.

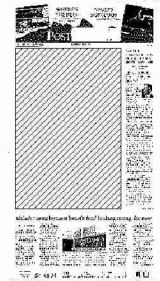
"They were very welcoming to the concepts we had. Everyone is open to learning from each other, and that's become even more the case because we know some people are better with online materials," Cook said.

Cook was one of those teachers who had online teaching skills. She had earned her teaching degree online through Western Governor's University before coming to Thunder Ridge and already had most of her classroom material available online when the school had to make the transition.

It also made her more comfortable than many of her students, who she felt were struggling the most with the change. Regular video classes and online assignments helped her students continue to make progress, but they weren't easy replacements for the activities she had hoped to do outdoors at the end of the year.

"Now I'd just tell them to go outside or look it up on YouTube. I really miss working with them, but I understand it has to be this way," Cook said.

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LaKesha Johnson records a special education pre-kindergarten class for Hawthorne Elementary School students at her home on Tuesday, May 5, 2020. Johnson says in class instruction would be more interactive and she said she's worried about some of the kids academically. "But they'll be fairly well prepared," said Johnson. Johnson said she has weekly calls with parents to build rapport and keep them informed and answer questions.