

A Day in the Life

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VISTA at Minnehaha elementary in Vancouver, WA

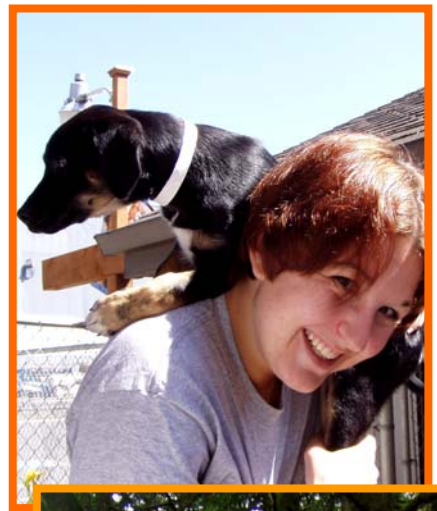
While there isn't really such a thing as a "typical" day as a WRC member, there are things you can count on. In my case, the following timeline applies to pretty much any Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. Thursdays are a little different, and it's a rare Friday that is spent on-site. Of course, there is always Arts Block, Wellness Block, testing, and various amounts of shuffling around to contend with, but for the most part, this is how it goes at Minne.

8:00 - Start of the workday. After my drive in from the suburbs, it's nice to be able to sit for a bit and relax. Minnehaha is a late start school, so things are usually pretty calm when we arrive, and we can usually still get a pretty good parking spot. The teachers are just starting to shuffle in. The kids usually don't start showing up for at least another half hour. This is a great time to check your email (which serves as your umbilical cord to that great technological mother known as the District Server). Email serves as a means of communication between coworkers at your school, WRC teammates at other sites, and even people from the big world beyond the public school setting. This is a particularly vital means of communication for us here at Minne, since our ability to receive incoming phone calls is spotty at best. I wasn't joking about that umbilical cord thing...

This is also the best time of day to check in and connect with site supervisors, coworkers, teachers, site mates, and anyone else who might be roaming about that you need to stay in touch with. People aren't usually too stressed out in the morning, making it a very productive time for interactions.

9:15 - School started five minutes ago, so after morning announcements and the Pledge of Allegiance, our second grade Read Well groups show up. They typically aren't terribly excited about this, since it's a regimented, scripted program. There is a certain amount of creativity available with this, since you don't always have to do Read Well. The idea is, however, that you help the students master whatever particular part of reading being focused on in the unit they're currently doing. You'll find yourself singing the "Read Well Song" - "Capital letter A, little letter a, what begins with A? Ant in an ambulance. A...A...A."

Despite the sometimes mind-numbing repetition, Read Well can present a great opportunity to develop relationships with kids. It can be a nice, calm way to ease into the school day. The predictability of having the same kids doing basically the same thing everyday can be comforting in a lot of ways. Plus, you almost never have to discipline kids who are still half asleep!



9:45 - First grade HOSTS. Read Well is ended by the entrance of tutors. A class from the local high school comes every day, Monday through Thursday, to do one-on-one reading tutoring with first grade students. It's a great opportunity for the high schoolers to get experience working with young children, and you can see the pride on their faces when they tell you that one of their kids "finally gets it!" It's also a very enjoyable time for the first graders, who feel special because they have one of the "big kids" for a friend, someone who listens to them, and takes a personal interest in them and what is going on in their lives. Coming to HOSTS isn't something they have to do because they don't read well enough, but rather something they get to do.

Having the high school students come in gives us the ability to work with one specific child on a consistent basis. I never really thought about the importance of consistency before this job, but I would say that it is definitely one of the things that makes the biggest difference in the lives of these kids. Again, it's all about building relationships with them.

10:15 - Break. This also offers a great opportunity to do some one-on-one tutoring to kids who are really struggling. It's also very useful for doing paperwork or some of the other projects that have to get done when you're not tutoring. This includes art projects, making flyers to send home, bulleting boards, planning family nights, recruiting volunteers, and any number of other things.

10:40 - Second grade HOSTS. Depending on the day, there are either adult volunteers from the community, or students from a local middle school who come in to help out with the tutoring. The HOSTS program, regardless of the age, focuses on improving reading and writing through a variety of ways. Tutors usually start with a read aloud, then spend a few minutes on comprehension, either focusing on understanding the ideas of what was read, or working with building vocabulary. Then there are games and activities that focus on phonics or writing assignments. While the program is fairly regimented, it's never the same from day to day.

11:15 - Third grade HOSTS. This program relies entirely on adult volunteers, which tends to lead to a greater amount of unpredictability in terms of who will be working with whom each day. But for the most part, the students are excited and enthusiastic to come, and they seem to enjoy themselves for the most part.

11:45 - AM Kindergarten Winning in the Beginning. For anyone who enjoys coloring, singing songs, read aloud stories, or making craft projects, this is the time to be here. There is a lot of singing the alphabet song, learning how to tie shoes, S-L-O-W-L-Y sounding out words, and practicing how to write our letters on white boards, chalk boards, paper, and their clothes, if you're not careful. But it's also the time when some of the funniest stories take place. After all, kids do say the darnedest things.

12:15 - PM Kindergarten Winning in the Beginning. This is probably one of my favorite times of day. There are fewer kids at this time than in the AM Winning group, meaning it's possible to get to know the kids better.

12:45 - Lunch time. Finally! Our lunch coincides with that of the fourth and fifth grade teachers, which is nice. You can usually avoid too much conversation about kids, for the simple fact that you don't really know their kids, and they don't really know yours. Sometimes, lunch off-site is called for. In these cases, sandwiches from the Safeway deli or anything (except the enchiladas) from Miguel's on St. John's and 54th come with the Minne WRC stamp of approval.



1:15 - Planning. After lunch is all about getting ready for afternoon group. Figure out what you're going to do that day, collect books, pencils, scissors, glue, crayons, markers, journals, and any art supplies that might be called for.

2:00 - Intensive Intervention. This group is made up of three or four second graders who really do need extra help with reading. Because there isn't a set curriculum for this group, it is possible to adapt each day's lessons to what these particular students need and enjoy. Often times, this gives kids who have trouble learning in the traditional classroom setting the extra bit of attention and help they need to really succeed. The small number of students makes it possible to do things that couldn't be done with a regular class. Spelling relays, vowel tag, and piñata making are some examples.

This is a particularly meaningful time of day for me. My strongest relationships with kids have been built during this afternoon group time. Through this group, the phrase "I don't care" went from being a rejection of encouragement and support to a catch phrase and a joke. "Bubba" went from being a mindless nickname to jealously guarded nickname. Recesses were given up so someone could stay inside and work on their reading one-on-one. More than the improvement in their reading, Intensive is about teaching students the joy of learning, encouraging socialization, and developing self-management skills.

3:30 - School's out. This leaves you with half an hour to wind down, finish up on paperwork for the day, check your email one last time, and share the funny/sad/encouraging stories from the day.

4:00 - Work day is done. As with anything, however, there are often things to be done after the school day is through. Meetings, planning, extra work, projects, family nights, and WRC events are just a few of the many things that rapidly eat up the rest of the day.

While it is difficult, and exhausting, and often times very frustrating, this can also be one of the most rewarding things to do. There will be good days, and there will be bad days. There will be times you want to quit, and there will be times you can't imagine doing anything else with your life. There will be times you want to adopt every little one you come in contact with, and times you seriously consider the having surgery to remove your own reproductive organs. But always remember, there is nothing more rewarding than knowing that you have given of yourself, no matter how little or inadequate it may seem. And although WRC probably won't make you famous in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of one little elementary school, for one short year, you could be a star.