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Wednesday, February 27, 2013

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- Local News
- Features
- Letters
- Opinion
- Columns
- Obituaries

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- Sports stories
- Sports briefs
- Schedule

Lifestyle

- Entertainment
- Connections
- Calendars
- Images of Polk County

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- Place an ad

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- Polk County Fair
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Photo by Pete Strong

Ash Creek Elementary fifth-grader Jayden Mays, right, asks a question of Linn-Benton Community College theater director Daniel Stone (holding microphone) during a question-and-answer session following a performance of "The Crane Wife" Thursday in Albany. Trips to free events at regional colleges and universities are a way for cash-strapped schools to preserve field trips.

February 19, 2013

MONMOUTH -- Life-sized Origami paper cranes decorated the stage of the Russell Tripp Performance Center at Linn-Benton Community College, while large Japanese lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting a dim light on actors clad in kimonos.

Fifth-grade students from Ash Creek Elementary School in Monmouth watched as three puppeteers manipulated the limbs and facial expressions of a large puppet, an art called Bunraku.

The students were here to see a version of the ancient Japanese folktale, "The Crane Wife," and get a dose of diverse culture and the magic of live theater.

Lbcc theater director Daniel Stone prompted questions from the audience's perspective. Hands shot up in the air, and students bantered with Stone and his troupe.

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"I so enjoy the look of awe on their faces when they get to `do it' instead of just read about it," said Ash Creek teacher Terry Wright. "Many of our students here do not get the chance to experience new things."

Field trips can change that. Unfortunately, they fall by the wayside when schools scale back expenses during a down economy.

Administrators and teachers at Ash Creek have tried resisting that trend during this recession. If the busy school calendar is any indication, they've mostly succeeded.

There are field trips almost every month. Through March, for example, kids will hear a symphony at Willamette University and visit Portland International Airport.

During "good times" at the school, there were perhaps 34 field trips planned, said Principal Barb Welander, who encourages staff to plan off-campus ventures when feasible. That number isn't much lower now.

"We can't stop doing those things that are so meaningful to children," Welander said. "I worry about paring back the curriculum to just preparing for reading and math tests ... that's much too narrow."

Field trips are planned by teachers and run on a combination of school funds for each classroom -- about \$200 -- as well as individual class fundraisers and money contributed by ACES' Parent Club. The district covers the cost of transportation.

Preserving field trips means being cost savvy, Welander said. Many ACES visits are to free events at regional colleges and universities.

"The colleges see it as outreach to students and part of creating a vision of seeing themselves someday in college," Welander said.

Teacher Dale Claussen will take his fifth-graders to PDX in March to visit with Oregon Air National Guard F-15 pilots as part of a lesson on public servants.

"There's a ton of research that shows how important it is to get kids out of the schools for learning," said Claussen, whose class has a field trip budget of about \$600. "We need to get their life experience more full ... that will make them want to learn more."

Ash Creek has an annual overnight field trip tradition to end the year -- fifth-graders get to experience the high desert geography of Bend.

"A lot of our kids have never been to Central Oregon," Claussen said.



Shawn Beam for the Itemizer-Observer
Trips to the Evergreen Air & Space Museum in McMinnville are a fixture for Ash Creek Elementary.