

Mark Washburn



# LESSONS FROM THE CLASSROOM

**LOGAN SEELY MPH '19 IS HOPING TO TURN HER PASSION FOR IMPROVING CHILDREN'S LIVES**

into a career in public health. In a classroom full of MDs, aspiring MDs, and others with a background in healthcare, the former kindergarten teacher stands out.

“At first, it took me a while to find my own ground and to accept that I had my own thoughts and opinions that were worthy of being heard,” Seely says. “My perspective may be different but it’s no less valuable.”

Although Seely considers her background “not as academic” as many of her MD and pre-med colleagues in Dartmouth Institute’s Master of Public Health (MPH) program, she is, in fact, no stranger to the classroom. She’s spent the past five years teaching kindergarten and first grade at elementary schools in Dover, New Hampshire. And, while earning her MEd at the University of New Hampshire, she was a student-teacher in a kindergarten classroom and a classroom assistant in third and seventh grade classrooms.

As an undergraduate, Seely first pursued a degree in chemical engineering, but in her senior year she began taking elective classes in elementary education and got hooked.

“I absolutely fell in love with teaching and being in the classroom,” she says. “The kids’ excitement to be there and to learn just draws you in. Even being there five hours a week as a student teacher, in this small role, I felt I was helping the kids, helping to shape their lives.”

While Seely clearly loved teaching and loved the kids, there were challenges that were difficult to overcome, including gaps in learning, children living with food insecurity, and parents struggling with substance use disorders.

“The kids who had difficult home lives for whatever reason had the same wonderment and excitement as kids who had more stable home lives, but because of things out of their control—and sometimes even out of their parents’ control—their education became a secondary priority

after day-to-day survival and coping,” Seely says.

It was the realization that there were things she couldn’t change no matter how much she loved and supported “her kids” in the classroom that led Seely to consider a career in public health. She had considered other options but felt public health would provide the best opportunity to help kids on a larger scale, whether through community health, policy advocacy, or program development.

And once she’d decided to pursue her MPH degree, Seely, a Vermont native, knew exactly where she wanted to study.

“As much as I loved my time on the Seacoast, I’m from the Upper Valley and this is where I wanted to start affecting change,” she says. “The fact that the Dartmouth program has a great reputation made my decision really easy.”

Seely’s capstone project in the residential MPH program, not surprisingly, focuses on early childhood education. She is facilitating a grant proposal that would introduce play-based learning into Vermont kindergartens. Play-based learning, Seely explains, uses a child’s natural motivation and drive to play as a context for learning.

“For example, while a child is playing with blocks, a teacher can ask questions that introduce a mathematical concept or encourage them to articulate a thought process,” Seely says, adding that there is significant evidence that this type of learning through play mitigates stress and can help kids develop interpersonal skills and build resilience.

When thinking about how to introduce play-based learning into a school curriculum, Seely draws on her own experience as a classroom teacher to ensure the model would be sustainable.

“As a former teacher, I know what it’s like to have to fit nine hours of things to do in a six and a half hour day, so any model to introduce play-based learning into curricula would have to be carefully developed as not to add more to teachers’ and administrators’ plates,” Seely says.

Seely has other ideas about how to improve Vermont children’s lives, including a public pre-school and parenting forums that would provide support structures for struggling parents and help families overcome what she calls the traditional New England pride and self-reliance that can prevent people from asking for help.

“I’ve seen how reluctant people are to ask for help, and how, even if they do, the right structures aren’t always in place,” Seely says. “But I’m an optimist and I’ve seen a lot of positive stories—like a single dad who went back to rehab so he could be clean, healthy, and present for his child by the time they were in first-grade. Children are incredibly resilient and can overcome almost anything with the right structures in place to support them. I want to help create those structures.”

PAIGE STEIN

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