

Personal Statement - Kamal Simmons

My experience in education has proven one thing more than all else: Community is everything. Being a part of the team at the Olympia Freedom Farm Alternative Education Program, I have seen countless examples of the direct impact and profound importance of this very fact.

At the Farm, collaboration and kindness are not simply ideals to aspire to; they are a daily reality. In the morning, students will greet each other with zeal and boundless happiness, and even the most tired faces turn to bright smiles. At lunchtime, I will see a student who is without food that day accept half a sandwich from an insistent and caring peer. And at the end of the day, I will hear students speaking about how they get home everyday. "I can help you with the city bus if it is scary! It was for me at first, too!" I can't help but feel joy wash over me like a warm wave. These moments kindle the fire of hope in my heart: the very same fire that burns despite being surrounded by a relentless chill.

For years, I could not place this brisk feeling. I could not find what caused my fire to wain and die. Over time, and upon reflection, however, I found that this chill that I felt was the cold rain of individualism. And I realized that it was not solely me who felt its frigid touch.

This school was different. Like an umbrella in the rain, it shielded students and staff alike from the cold that our world seems to have in abundance. The staff had time to collaborate outside of student time, and find ways to help those who were falling through the cracks. And the students were given a place to call home, and rarely wanted to leave.

The Farm showed me a different kind of educational experience. One that demands that every student, regardless of background or ability level, is equally a part of. I realized that this is not simply a direction that we should be going. Rather, it is our duty as educators.

This realization led to me looking at which students were being left behind in our current system. Students who were not able to bask in the warmth of community. At the core of many of these cases was a single commonality: Difficulties in communication. The students who struggled the most were not those with less of a supposed “innate aptitude.” Rather, they were the students who had the most difficulties communicating with peers and staff. Thus, I knew that I had to make an intentional focus on communication, rather than pure academic prowess.

Now, driven by a new, inextinguishable fire in my heart, I want to learn everything I can about how to bring that community to every student. The skills that I gain through Evergreen’s Integrated Multilingual Learner Pathway will allow me to forge stronger connections with students of all backgrounds, ensuring that students feel a strong connection to their community.

I am eager to bring this vision to life to ensure that no student is left in the cold, and every heart finds its place within the warmth of a true community.