

Monticello Church engages young students



Taylor

MONTICELLO, Miss. (BP) – Pastor Sam Taylor of Monticello Church, Monticello, heard about the challenges of being a teacher from several in the profession – active and retired – in his congregation. He also heard it from his wife Alyssa who works as a teacher’s aide at Monticello Elementary.

As tends to be the case across the nation, and particularly in more rural areas, the Monticello calendar revolves around the local school system. It’s the largest employer, Taylor said, and directly impacts the type of young citizens who will be living in Lawrence County in the future.

When it came to deciding how the church could be a part of strengthening area schools, Taylor took a bold step. He asked.



SPECIAL REWARD – Students watch a movie approved by their school and enjoy snacks at Monticello Church, Monticello, as part of a reward program for positive behavior at their school. (Photo credit: Monticello Church)

That has led to efforts such as providing lunches for teachers and “snack buckets” where students can receive a reward in class, but partnering with Monticello Elementary’s positive behavior program has left the biggest imprint. Through it, Monticello Church has hosted game days and movies for students who have met positive behavior goals.

The partnership has brought several students and their families to visit the church, but teachers benefit just as much. “I’ve had multiple conversations with teachers about what the program means for the students,” Taylor said. “COVID took a lot of the fun things out of school, the times when people were together. For students and teachers to have something to look forward to is significant.”

On movie days, buses carry students to the church for two separate viewings of the same school-approved film. One film is shown in the morning and another in the afternoon. It’s treated as a field trip and a reward for students meeting their behavior goals.

Monticello Church provides the popcorn. “It’s great to have

some fun, get out, and celebrate what you've done to justify that reward," Taylor said.



Hobson

One state to the east, David Hobson is in his seventh year of teaching. That practically makes him a veteran as half of Alabama's new teachers leave the classroom within three years.

Hobson wears multiple hats. At Dallas County High School in Plantersville, he teaches government and economics while serving as co-athletic director and coaching football and track. He's also the director of missions at Mud Creek Association in Bessemer.

"Absolutely, there are times I find myself as the veteran teacher," he said. Sometimes, encouraging a new teacher who's had a rough day is very much like the encouragement he'll give a pastor. "Ultimately, both are a call to service. The big thing in either one is finding joy in that service," he said.

Hobson spent 15 years in student ministry before going to Mud Creek Association. Students are a priority, he said, but reaching out to the educators leading them daily can't be far behind. "I feel like the church is called to that school campus to minister just as much to the administration and faculty.

"It may be that a new teacher is wondering if he or she made a mistake and needs someone from the outside to say they are loved and appreciated, to get them through the week or even the rest of the school year," he said.

Both Taylor and Hobson are aware of the stories of high teacher turnover across the nation. As the school year begins to wind down and teachers look forward to a much-deserved summer break, it can also be a time for churches to reassess how involved they can be before August arrives and classes are back in session.

When that time comes, Taylor said, don't underestimate the impact of a Christlike witness. "If churches don't help, schools will become increasingly harsh environments. The learning environment and students' proficiency will only decrease. Our public education system can benefit tremendously from churches willing to engage, to mobilize members to reach out," he said.

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Sam Taylor, pastor of Monticello Church, Monticello

Hobson can relate with the temptation for a teacher to go in another direction. "There was a time where I myself thought about [leaving] and giving it up because I felt talked down to, condescended, and even unsafe at times when dealing with certain superiors and parents," he said.

Hobson's and Taylor's school systems lie in rural areas where a lack of resources can be a constant problem. If for any reason they have to switch to virtual learning, Internet connectivity becomes an issue. Some churches have helped to fill such gaps by offering Wi-Fi and learning space at the church for students.

With a foot in both worlds, Hobson has ideas on how churches and schools can partner effectively. "As far as churches go, be involved. It really means a lot to a teacher because it

shows them that they are not alone," he said. "Teaching and ministry are two of the loneliest professions there are. We have to lean on and support each other in what we do."

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