

# Spotswood Principal Wants To Build Community Of Learners

By MEGAN WILLIAMS Daily News-Record

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**HARRISONBURG** — After years of working with high school students, Deb Cook decided she wanted to try her hand at shaping elementary school students.

Three years ago, Cook moved from Charlottesville High School to Spotswood Elementary School in Harrisonburg. She was an assistant principal in Charlottesville and became the assistant principal at Spotswood.

Although she had spent her 14-year career up until that point working with high school students, she wanted to know what it would be like to educate and mold students before they got to the high school level.

“There are a lot of events you can celebrate with young people” at the high school level, Cook said. “But by then, their self worth is set.”

Cook decided she wanted to see what it was like from the front end, with the division’s youngest students.

After three years as assistant principal, the Harrisonburg City School Board named Cook principal for the 2019-2020 school year.

“I feel very fortunate. I have a really, really dynamic community of learners and adults who are in the game for the right reasons,” Cook said.

Cook wants to focus on making sure students know that they are readers, writers and learners, and there is a place for them regardless of intellect.

“At the high school level, some students didn’t see themselves as that,” Cook said, adding that once that mentality is set, it’s hard to change it.

Cook also wants to continue Spotswood’s reputation as a community school that is powered by a lot of involvement.

Spotswood has an open-door policy where anyone from the community can come in and help or observe in the classroom. One example of the school giving to the community is through its clothes closet, which is run entirely by volunteers. It's important to those who work at Spotswood that students and their families have the right resources to get through school and life.

"Basic needs have to be met before we do the other work," she said. It's important that students feel safe emotionally and physically. Otherwise they won't be successful learners.

"We really do have a super talented student body that is culturally and linguistically diverse," Cook said. "I'm very grateful for this opportunity."

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