

“It will help explain that all emotions are OK, but also help explain how to regulate them. When kids’ needs are met, they thrive.” — Rachel Godfrey

Calm

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body. Students said it will help them control themselves and calm down in order to return to classes.

“There are many who just need a quick reset, and sensory is often what they are seeking,” one teacher said in responding to the anonymous survey.

Another wrote, “The sooner we can teach elementary kids how to regulate their bodies, the more successful they will be at school and at home. This is a great opportunity for teachers to provide helpful information to parents, as well.”

And still others said, “It will help explain that all emotions are OK, but also help explain how to regulate them,” and “when kids’ needs are met, they thrive.”

Board members, parents and students helped to paint the room a deep purple. Dimmable lighting was added, along with covers over the ceiling fixtures that give the appearance of stars in space. A light show device projects stars, planets or butterflies on the ceiling, as well.

The room has a space theme, with other references to stars, planets and astronauts. A plaque outside, which bears Ronan Godfrey’s name, shows an astronaut in a space suit — but look closely, and you’ll see that the astronaut is a cougar, like the Willamette Elementary mascot.

A rug in the Sensory Room shows two cats — or cougars — curled on the floor. Space-theme pillows and seats are removable, as are pads on the walls. They can be exchanged with other objects, such as a light-up table, or the room can be left bare.

Some of the seating features, including a canoe made of dense foam and fabric, are designed to hug children to make them feel secure.

Godfrey said she still wants to add fiber optic lights and bubble tubes, along with a “steam roller,” a crawl-through calming device.

Additional items are stored in bins outside, in the larger special education room. Teachers can choose from among the bins to customize the experience for the student in the Sensory Room — stuffed creatures



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Arrow Larkin, 5, tries out stepping stones in the special education room at Willamette Elementary School. Supplies for the Sensory Room are kept here and can be used by students in either space. In the background are visiting parents, school officials and representatives of the Traveling Light Foundation, which created the Sensory Room and is keeping track of how it is used and how it can be improved.

that hug, for example; a bear with a pen for writing secret messages, revealed by black light; pieces that can be put together; color-changing lights; or fidget toys.

Some of the fidget toys were created by Callum Godfrey, Ronan’s brother who now is a freshman at McMinnville High School. He made the green and purple toys on his 3D printer.

Students are already using the room — it is open to both special needs students and those in the general population; they can refer themselves or be referred by teachers.

“Many students have sensory needs,” said Stephanie Murdock, Willamette principal. “We’re very, very grateful for the support of the community and the foundation.”

In addition to the new Sensory Room, each classroom at Willamette has a calming corner. The school also has a “buddy bench” where a student can sit and be joined by a new friend.

Ronan liked having such a bench when he was a student at Newby, Nick Godfrey said. It helps students learn “how important it is to look out for each other as good humans,” he said.

TLF’s inspiration, Ronan Godfrey, was a student at Duniway Middle School, as

well, before he died in 2021 from a rare disease called dyskeratosis congenita. His parents said he enjoyed working with several McMinnville teachers, including special education staff, when he was able to attend classes.

Ronan loved making and narrating videos for his YouTube channel, Subterranean Gaming. He liked jokes, especially one about a photon that told the airport screeners he had no luggage because “I’m traveling light.”

The joke inspired the name of the foundation, and Ronan’s memory inspired TLF to install a video production facility at Dun-

away in 2024.

Traveling Light also has given STEM awards to eighth-graders and special education scholarships, sponsored a sixth-grade field trip to Junior Biz Town, provided soccer balls, and donated to Booksgiving and a kindergarten library.

The foundation is planning more projects, including improvements to three areas at Mac High: the Lifeskills room and outdoor area; the Wellness Center; and the Success Center.

Donations to support the Traveling Light Foundation’s work may be made through the website, gotlf.org/donate.

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Interim Superintendent Kourtney Ferrua tries out a weighted stuffed animal that gives the wearer a hug during an open house at Willamette Elementary School’s new Sensory Room. With her is Traveling Light board member Erin O’Connor.



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