

Lara Belice - 2022 Montana Rural Teacher of the Year Cooke City School

Lara's success, as the sole licensed educator at Cooke City School—an isolated, K-8 rural one-room school—is the direct result of her non-traditional path to teaching. Lara has taught at Cooke City for the past 4 years. This year's student enrollment spanned 6 grade levels—Kindergarten through 7th; next year's enrollment will span the full spectrum—Kindergarten through 8th.

Prior to becoming a teacher, Lara created an award-winning landscape design and landscape construction business, in San Diego, California. In 2005, she moved to the Big Hole Valley of Montana, fulfilling her childhood aspiration to reside in the mountains. In 2014, her love of adventure travel took her to a remote location of rural China, on the Tibetan Plateau, where she taught English as a volunteer, at a school for Tibetan children. This unique experience inspired Lara to enroll in the elementary education program at the University of Montana Western, at Dillon.

Lara obtained her K-8 teaching license, with a literacy K-12 endorsement, in January of 2018, and immediately accepted a mid-year position, teaching 7th and 8th grade science and social studies at Cayuse Prairie Elementary School in the Flathead Valley. Lara found the small-town mountain living she desired when she moved to Cooke City in August of 2018, to prepare for the 2018-2019 school year.

Since becoming the lead teacher at Cooke City School, Lara has implemented numerous place-based educational connections to the Greater Yellowstone Area, such as multi-night backpacking outings and nature hikes, ski touring, wildlife viewing with local field experts, as well as visits to historical sites and world-class museums, to engage her diverse group of students in learning that is personally relevant to their lives. Additionally, she recently achieved a closed-loop food system at the school, constructing a 26 foot diameter geodesic dome greenhouse to permit year-round gardening at an elevation of 7,600 feet and installed a composting system to withstand the extreme cold and wildlife that are an everyday occurrence at Cooke City. The students and community contribute compostable waste, which is returned to nourish the production of vegetables for the school and community, at a location where the nearest grocery store is a one-way drive of an hour and a half. Lara applies all of her life experiences, knowledge, and philosophy of teaching and learning to create and deliver effective and engaging, powerful learning experiences, for the direct benefit of the Cooke City students and community.