



# River Bend Elementary School

## Placement Description

Rockingham County Elementary School placement that offers practical foundational experience working with students.

## Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- One-on-one mentoring with 4-8 students (ages 5-12)
- Group counseling experiences (with counselor)
- Consultation with parents and teachers
- Classroom instruction assistance (Guidance Classes PK-5)
- Student Study, ASSIST, and other team service coordination meetings

## Contact Information

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**Read about students' experiences at this site below:**

*Spring 2024 – Anna Atkinson*

For the past few months, I have had the privilege of interning at River Bend Elementary School. River Bend Elementary's mission is to "provide a safe, dynamic, nurturing, and innovative learning environment in which each child has the opportunity to reach his/her highest potential." Being a Title 1 school, River Bend relies heavily on the mental health resources they can provide to their students. There are two school counselors who work with the students of River Bend to help ensure that each student is being given the skills and tools they need to succeed in their learning. River Bend also takes a JMU graduate intern, who was also a helpful



resource for me when figuring out my future plans. The staff at River Bend works together closely to ensure that each student is being supported and appreciated.

Ms. Kim knew that when I began my field placement I was more interested in school psychology than school counseling. Rather than trying to convince me to take the school counseling path, Ms. Kim set up a meeting with me and River Bend's school psychologist. I am extremely grateful that she allowed me to meet with him, as it only made me more certain of what I want my future career to be. I was able to meet with a group of students weekly, which allowed me to form closer relationships with some of the students and allow me to gain more experience working with children in a relaxed setting. I was able to observe counseling sessions, mediations, parent meetings, and even CPS calls. I was able to observe attendance meetings, as well as be a part of the Behavioral Emotional Support Team. I also was able to help Ms. Kim teach classes, where students learn about socio-emotional concepts and tools/techniques they can use throughout their lives.

Because River Bend is a Title 1 school, I would say I have had some unique experiences. During my time at River Bend I experienced the repercussions of what the students were dealing with at home. There have been several cases of child neglect, substance abuse, and sexual assault. When I chose to spend my field placement in an elementary school, I had no idea I would be dealing with such heavy, disturbing incidents. However, because of this, I think I have gotten more out of this experience than I would have at another site. Having both counselors, and the JMU graduate intern ended up being the perfect support system that I needed to stay positive throughout the day. Ms. Kim is truly a gifted human being. She loves her job, and it shows through everything she does. Before starting at my site, I was most worried about my lack of confidence/social anxiety I constantly face when speaking to other adults. I knew participating in field placement would be a challenge, however Ms. Kim ensured that I was always comfortable. I got to break out my comfort zone at my own pace, and I really appreciate Ms. Kim gave me the opportunity to do so. The heavy topics I experienced could be seen as a negative aspect to some, but to me it was a huge advantage. I would love to gain experience in all types of situations. As for limitations, there were none! My experience was in my control.

My overall knowledge of psychology helped me be more successful at my site. During the BEST meetings, there were a lot of abbreviations used such as ID and ADHD—two things I wouldn't know if I didn't take abnormal psych. Counseling psych was also important for my site, as it taught me everything I know about how to be a good counselor, as well as ethics and confidentiality. Because River Bend has Pre-K through 5th grade, there is a wide variety of ranges. It was neat to think back on my developmental psychology class and how Ms. Kim's class lessons needed to be altered based on the students' cognitive development. It felt really good to be able to use what I have learned in the real world.

When I first arrived at River Bend, Ms. Kim and the rest of the staff were feeling extremely frustrated about the Rockingham County Book Ban that took place on January 9th. One of Ms. Kim's favorite children's book "The Invisible Boy," was placed on the banned list and removed from the shelves in schools. Ms. Kim used this book quite often in her counseling, so she reached out to the school board in search of answers. The school board said they have read this book and loved it! They explained that the book must have been placed on the list by mistake, however it will remain banned until further notice. Being in the elementary school while



all of this was going on led me to decide that my contribution project should be on the book ban. Although there was nothing I could do to get the books off the list, Ms. Kim explained to me that there is a process where books can be approved without getting direct approval from the school board. Ms. Kim gave me 47 of her favorite books that she would like to use in counseling sessions and guidance class. I filled out an application and read each of the 47 books. The books are currently in the process of being read by two other faculty members and will soon be able to be used at River Bend. The books I am getting approved include several meaningful, important concepts displayed in a way children can easily understand and connect with.

Overall, my field placement at River Bend Elementary has been the highlight of my time at JMU. It felt so rewarding to take everything I have learned in college so far and put it to use. This experience has shown me that in my future career I would absolutely love to be involved in supporting and advocating for the well-being of children. After this experience, I have more confidence and am looking forward to what my future holds.

### ***Spring 2022 - Lea Ripper***

My field placement at River Bend Elementary School with school counselor Mrs. Kim Muraskin has been the single most influential, impactful and fun aspect of my undergraduate career. The mission of Rockingham County Public Schools at large is to “provide a safe, dynamic, nurturing, and innovative learning environment in which each child has the opportunity to reach his/her highest potential”. River Bend Elementary School serves grades preschool through fifth, and provides two Head Start classrooms, a Special Education PreK, a noncategorical PreK, and a mostly self-contained Autism Spectrum Disorder classroom. Applied Behavior Analysis, group counseling, individual counseling, and psychological services such as IEP (Individual Education Plan)/504 (disability) evaluations are also available.

Kim was incredibly helpful and compassionate from the first day I met her. The fact that she was so supportive of my present and future goals even after only having known me for a short period is a testament to her amazing ability as both a school counselor and as a mentor. When I started at River Bend, I was nervous and unsure about working in a school. I loved children, but I was hesitant and unconfident (my hands actually shook while simply reading a book to second graders). Being with her at the school for two days a week has drastically increased my confidence working in schools as well as my abilities to work with children and mental health. Kim clearly devotes herself to all of the children (and teachers) at River Bend and I have seen the massive impact she has had on the school’s overall mental health and wellbeing even in the short time I have been there. Her care for all of the students is evident to everyone.

The aspects of River Bend that I liked the most are getting to know Kim and other staff, the student-centered counseling with lots of toys for playing with students, the great teachers (many of whom have taught for years), the caring administration, and the material resources provided for students such as clothes and food. The welcoming atmosphere is great for any student considering working in schools who might be nervous: No one is ridiculed for mistakes and everyone is learning.

I was able to participate in the following over the semester: classroom observations, helping teach as well as occasional independent teaching of guidance lessons, observing student



study meetings, observing and participating in individual and group counseling, participating in Applied Behavior Analysis groups, independent play-based mentoring, observing guardian ad litem meetings, and coaching Girls on the Run after school. Kim made it clear that I was free to shape my own experience in order to get the most out of my placement. One aspect of River Bend that may be important to disclose is that it is a Title 1 school (a school that receives special funding because a high proportion of students are in poverty). Many families lack financial and social resources, and therefore many students struggle with poverty-related Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs) such as parental drug abuse, harsh corporal punishment, child abuse, child neglect/parent involvement, foster care placements, and custody disputes. I think that a field placement student considering River Bend should come in somewhat prepared to deal with heartbreaking and upsetting disclosures from students in a calm, professional manner. People who have experienced those events in their own childhoods may find some conversations with students upsetting or distressing if it reminds them of their own childhood; however, they may also be better equipped to form relationships with and understand those students! Kim was helpful in teaching me how to deal with those difficult situations.

Through my field placement with Kim, I have learned many of the skills I will need to be an effective teacher in the fall: classroom management, behavior support, play-based mentoring, teaching engaging lessons, and being a nurturing role model to students through difficult times in their lives. I cannot overestimate how much Kim has helped me towards my goals and shaped the future school professional I aim to be. Halfway through the semester, I made a goal change from pursuing a master's degree to deciding to work full-time as an elementary school teacher in the fall. Getting a chance to see various school professionals work (principal, assistant principal, school counselor, school psychologist, teacher, instructional assistant, behavior support assistant, Board-Certified Behavior Analyst, and more) made me realize that school psychology may not be for me. Forming relationships and seeing many of the same students everyday through Kim's office made me realize that I want a more active, day-to-day role in children's learning and development.

Several components of the psychology major at James Madison University have prepared me for field placement. The Counseling Psychology (PSYC 325) course was helpful because I learned how to use Rogers' three conditions in talking with students: unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and genuineness. Even when students misbehave (often), I try my hardest to retain an overall positive view of who they are inside and who they can become over time even if their current behavior disappoints me. I try to understand the world from their point of view. Learning those skills in Counseling Psychology has helped with field placement because a lot of your day is spent listening to children talk about their lives!

My contribution project, even though it did not end up coming to fruition, was planned around reducing child abuse and increasing parent-school communication at report card time. While some parents are involved at the school, River Bend has overall low parent participation; for example, routine parent-teacher conferences do not occur because no-shows were so prevalent in past years. Parent involvement is upsetting because research clearly indicates that the number one variable most predictive of a child's school success is their parent's involvement in their education. My contribution project involved cards that would be attached to the outside of each report card envelope asking parents to stop what they are doing, look at the report card,



and listen to what their child has to say. If they are unhappy with the report card, they are instructed to turn to the back where information on how to contact teachers and Kim is laid out so that parents know exactly what the next steps are. I believe that increasing parent involvement at the school (even if it only works for a few families) is a potential way that River Bend could increase student achievement and decrease student anxiety around report card time.

Overall, I will miss River Bend Elementary and Kim as soon as I leave for the last time this May! While working in schools is difficult, being with a supportive supervisor and mentor like Kim makes all of the difference and has made me genuinely excited and confident about my future work with children. Thank you River Bend and Kim for everything!

### *Fall 2021 - Erica King*

Going into field placement I knew that I wanted to work with children, whether that be in elementary schools or one of the private counseling options. I ended up being placed at River Bend Elementary, where I got to intern under the school counselor and experience life in that career weekly. The mission at River Bend is to create a safe learning environment for all, respect our peers, be engaged while in school, and strive for success. As the school counseling intern, I was able to observe and experience how each of those statements were achieved. I was able to build positive relationships with several of the students and show them that I was someone who is trustworthy and that speaking with me was a safe space. I had the opportunity to meet with a specific group of fifth-grade girls once a week, and we spent time growing as a team and learning to respect all of our differences. Not only is it strongly encouraged for the students to engage in the school environment, but also for the teachers and staff. Being placed in an elementary school meant working with children of all ages, and one of the most valuable lessons that I was taught was how important it is to engage with the younger students. I was taught that you are essentially putting on a performance. In other words, I learned how to make your normal speaking voice more energetic and engage in conversation with the younger students in a very exciting way like it is the best thing you've ever heard. The same standard was also expected for the last piece of the mission statement - striving for success. Every day that I attended the school, I would want to try my best and give it my all. Through doing that, I ended up falling in love with the program and would be disappointed every time I was unable to attend.

I am quite sad that this experience has come to an end. I built a great relationship with my supervisor. Receiving constructive criticism did not offend me and I felt more motivated to learn about things that I did not necessarily know going into this program. I learned so much about interactions with children in grades K-5, and I think that this knowledge will help me in more than just the professional area of my life.

My favorite memory overall was my fifth-grade lunches. I had the same six girls from one class once a week in the counseling office where I was able to get to know the girls. Before each lunch, I would often prepare a little lesson or talking points that went along with the theme of growing as a community and respecting one another as young ladies. I think that my more receptive lessons from the girls were about bullying. Unfortunately, it seems like everyone experiences a form of bullying at some point, cyber or traditional. I wanted to send the message that under no circumstances is it acceptable and go over the ways that we as individuals and a



community can prevent it. We addressed different forms of bullying and went over various scenarios and solutions, such as speaking up about experiencing or witnessing it.

I have three little sisters and was a nanny for several years, which helped me have an idea of child behavior before starting this program. It genuinely prepared me for the number of students that you see in one day. I learned to be patient with children a long time ago, so I was able to use this skill by staying very level-headed during all conversations with students of all different temperaments.

One thing that I did struggle with was being aware of the different situations that the children experience and the home lives that they come from. My time at River Bend could be considered a culture shock due to the fact I have never been in a school where everyone received free or reduced lunches, even if it is not needed for everyone. I also saw the various types of trauma that children may experience as toddlers and the effects that the trauma takes on them as they age and develop. When I was in elementary school, I never really saw the school counselor, which caused me to have no idea how massively important they are to the proper functioning of the school system.

As I touched on earlier, I was unaware of the level of enthusiasm needed to effectively engage with the younger students. I consider myself to have been very mellow and level-headed while engaging with the students, and my supervisor saw that in me as well. I think not learning that about myself earlier on, limited my ability to create stronger bonds with younger students. However, I am very thankful for the bonds that I created with several of the older students - 3rd through 5th grade. Overall, I enjoyed my experience there daily. At first, it took a while to get used to being the adult referred to as "Ms. King" instead of being the student. However, I got used to hearing it with time and have grown to love it.

Prior to this experience, I was aware that I wanted to have a profession in some sort of counseling, but now I know I am set on wanting to be a school counselor, and then maybe down the road look into doing private family counseling. I am currently applying to graduate programs to get my masters in either School Counseling, Clinical Psychology, Counseling. Receiving a master's in Counseling would allow me to understand the mental health of students in a more in-depth way and potentially be more effective in that area. I am also contemplating becoming an LPC, which would allow me to provide counsel, and keeping up with those requirements would allow me to feel more confident in transferring to private counseling if I chose to do that.

All in all, I had a great experience, and I would recommend an elementary school placement with anyone thinking about working with children or to someone who already enjoys working with children.