

Ms. Van Aalst – Pre-Kindergarten

"Winter the Rabbit, can you hop this way?" invites Katrina Van Aalst. A smiling student approaches with the rabbit hand puppet she made from a brown paper bag. "I'm so glad to see you!" says Ms. Van Aalst. "Oh, what happened to you?" Speaking as Winter, the child explains, "Somebody pushed me." So begins the dialogue that Ms. Van Aalst (aka Safety Owl) has with each student as part of the annual "Owl Be Safe" puppet show, a landmark event. The children choose their safety tips, decide which animal characters they will portray, create their puppets and perform in front of family and friends.



Ms. Van Aalst beams as the children take center stage one by one. She is animated and encouraging, making sure each student shines.

It's clear that Katrina Van Aalst's inner child is never very far from the surface. She has a way about her that makes children comfortable. "I love to read children's books, I love to sing, I love to dance," she enthuses, "and those things don't embarrass me. I love doing them."

Maybe that's why she's so crazy about kindergartners. "What I love is that they teach you how to enjoy the simplest things. They find joy in a silly rock. A butterfly. They teach you not to sweat the big stuff. You walk into the classroom and they look up and smile and you think, 'This is going to be a great day.'"

The rewards don't stop there. Now in her seventh year of teaching at TCS, Ms. Van Aalst never tires of the moment when her students discover that they're learning to read. They begin with basic, simple sounds, then blend them together to make words. All of a sudden, they realize they're reading. "There's a light in their eyes," says Ms. Van Aalst, "It's like a spark, an 'aha' moment for them. They experience joy because now there's a whole new world that's open to them. Books aren't just pictures anymore."

With a degree in elementary education and an emphasis in early childhood education, Katrina Van Aalst is doing just what she always wanted to do. When the opportunity to teach at Topeka Collegiate became available, she says, "I took it as a sign. Not only was it the age of my dreams, it was where my kids were in school. It was a perfect match!"