



Small Talk

the official newsletter of the

Oregon Small Schools Association

Winter 2011

The case for Oregon's small schools



By: **Al Meunier**
OSSA Executive Director

Citizens of the rural parts of Oregon are a hardy group of folks. They are fiercely independent, hard working, and self-sufficient. The economy of rural Oregon has been in decline for 20 years. While many citizens have moved to a more urban setting, there are still thousands of people who remain in the small towns throughout Oregon. They are representatives of a lifestyle that is critical to our state and society in general. The anchor for most of these communities is the local school. The vast majority of community activities occur in the school building.

It is also where the children of rural residents are prepared for the world beyond their local communities. The local school is where these families build a future for the community and the state. Small schools have very low dropout rates and a high percentage of students that go on to college. The graduates of rural schools are sprinkled throughout the state in every business and industry. Small schools produce students who excel.

In the big picture of school funding, the resources required to maintain small schools is minimal. While our requirements are not very significant, there are a few items that we need for the survival of small schools. These include:

- **The small high school funding formula.**

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OSSA 2010-2011 Teacher of the Year: Joyce Garland

Congratulations to Joyce Garland, who was named the Oregon Small Schools Association's Teacher of the Year for 2010-2011 during the November Small Schools Breakfast at the OSBA Annual Convention in Portland. Garland is a history teacher at Sheridan High School (Sheridan School District) in Sheridan, Ore.



Garland, who's taught at Sheridan High for all of her nine-year teaching career, was nominated by her principal, superintendent and head of the school's English department. Sheridan High Principal Dean Rech said that as he read the criteria for the OSSA Teacher of the Year, he "realized that

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Small schools should have larger voice

By: **George Murdock**,
Superintendent, Douglas ESD

Small schools make up more than two-thirds of the local districts in Oregon, so naturally you would think they would have friends in Oregon's state house.

Unfortunately, they don't.

Instead, they are faced with a governor who believes consolidation is the answer to this state's education funding woes and an education policy advisor who is part of a movement to enrich the have's at the expense of the have not's.



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Nancy Golden, who has the governor's ear on all things education, also serves as superintendent of schools in Springfield, and whether you're talking about ESD funding or shares of the state's general fund, her number one priority seems to be what's best for large districts like the one she serves.

Small schools can't expect much help from the House either, where Education Committee Chair Sara Gelsler has taken aim at formula funds designed to help level the playing field for the rural districts which dot much of Oregon. Gelsler has suggested that if small communities want to keep their schools, they should shoulder a larger tax bill to pay for them. That's an idea that has merit, but there are some questions about equity that have to be answered first. In addition, there's no guarantee some property-rich small districts aren't already paying more than their fair share.

Governor Kitzhaber commented earlier in February that he is concerned about local solutions because they might deter momentum from statewide solutions. As the Eugene Register-Guard noted in an editorial on Feb. 15, "for starters, local school taxes in Eugene, Portland and other jurisdictions can't possibly weaken support for a statewide plan, because no such plan exists."

There is certainly a case to be made for the idea of consolidating small schools and reducing the number of districts that operate in Oregon. But that comes with a price. Rural Oregon has already been desecrated by policies which stifle its historic reliance on resource-based endeavors. Shuttering the public schools which remain the only vestige of hope in these communities could be the last straw.

Bill Wadlington, superintendent of the tiny Creston School District west

of Spokane, Wash., noted recently "in rural and remote communities, the school and community act as a symbiotic organism where the school supports the town government that supports the local citizenry that supports community organizations, etc. The caring and community-focused attitude that supports at-risk students is the model that larger schools and communities seek to ensure student success exists in small, rural schools."

Since no one is asking rural Oregon how it feels about the issue of consolidation, it's little wonder small towns and small schools feel alienated and disengaged from a government that has long since forgotten there are 36 counties in Oregon — not just four or five. And little wonder small school administrators wonder if the state has almost 200 school districts or just 12 or 15.

Whether or not Oregon has too many school districts will forever be a relative question. Years ago, the state had 2,500. Now it has less than 200. There is no silver bullet in terms of the optimum number. There are only a dozen or so with 10,000 students like Springfield. In Eastern Oregon, the largest district is Hermiston with 5,000. Next is Pendleton with a little over 3,000.

A few others — Morrow County, Milton-Freewater, LaGrande, Baker, and Ontario — hover around the 2,000 mark. There are parts of rural Oregon where students would have to be transported hundreds of miles in order to assemble 10,000 kids.

Somewhere in between lies a happy medium.

Before consolidation becomes a reality, there are some basic questions that need to be asked, beginning with a clear identification of precisely what savings would be experienced if 50 or 60 districts suddenly disappeared. Large districts like to suggest they have the corner on student achievement and improved teacher performance. Where is the data to support that claim? Very few of Oregon's small districts have been cited as needing improvement in terms of the state's testing data.

In fact, under Oregon's annual report card system, small schools historically are at or near the top.

There is universal agreement Oregon needs to get a grip on how it funds its schools and the governor should be applauded for raising the topic. He has also said he wants the operation of Oregon's government to look different.

Inviting the rest of the state to participate in the conversation might be a good place to start.

George Murdock is superintendent of Douglas ESD, and also is a former executive director of OSSA.

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I have the 2010/11 Teacher of the Year in my building.”

“In the fourteen years that I have worked in education, I have never met someone with so much passion and dedication to help students as I have witnessed in Joyce,” Rech said in his nomination letter. “She truly personifies the heart of a teacher by her willingness to go the extra mile for her students.”

Rech added that while Garland has been instrumental in much positive change at Sheridan High School, she is the “brain child” of the Spartan Academy, a course designed to help students recover their credits. Since Garland started the program nine years ago, hundreds of Sheridan students have gotten back on track to graduate.

“She is an incredible teacher with an amazing gift for reaching young men and women,” Rech said. “Through her tireless efforts and insightful contributions, she has made a more promising future for the students at Sheridan High School.”

Garland says that after 13 years as a stay-at-home mom, coaching her sons’ soccer teams, volunteering in classrooms and tutoring, teaching seemed to come naturally.

“I loved the classroom climate, the interaction with the students, and the camaraderie of the staff,” Garland said

in her award application. While pursuing her social science teaching degree at Western Oregon University, Garland had the opportunity to student teach at Sheridan High School. Her experience there impressed administrators, who offered Garland a full-time foods and social studies teaching position just two months after she graduated with honors from WOU in June 2002. She later achieved her Master’s in Education from WOU in 2006.

Garland said she appreciates having had the opportunity to teach so many different subjects at Sheridan – 25 so far – and the chance to get to know so many of the school’s students. She even claims that her biggest accomplishment was accepting a job in a place that allowed her room to grow and nurture relationships with supportive people.

“We are a small, intimate community of staff and students, and I cherish the family feel of our school,” she said. “I believe that my accomplishments have been encouraged, supported and nurtured by two extraordinary principals and a superintendent who allowed me to create courses, implement best practices, lead fellow staff, attend intensive training seminars, and follow my heart to develop what is in the best interest of everyone in our school. Because of their confidence in me, I have conquered goals beyond my imagination.”

Why become a member of OSSA? The benefits are well worth it!

Advocacy:

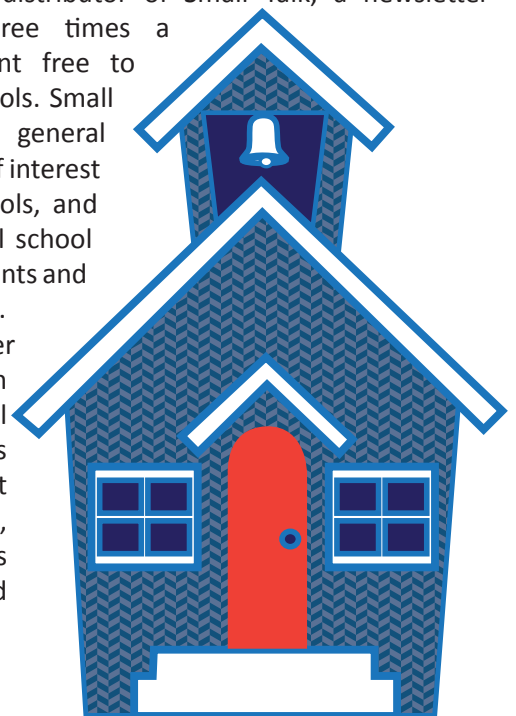
- OSSA is an active advocate for small schools at the Oregon Legislative Assembly, and has its own lobbyist in Jim Green.
- OSSA provides an opportunity for member districts to meet and lobby their legislators at the February OSBA and Eastern Oregon Leadership Institute day.

Convention/Conference Sessions

- OSSA sponsors Educator Institutes each year.
- The OSSA honors an Oregon Small Schools Association Teacher of the Year from one of its member schools annually. This educator is honored each November at the OSSA Breakfast at the Oregon School Boards Association Annual Convention in Portland.
- OSSA provides breakout sessions at the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators’ Seaside Conference annually, as well as at the winter Superintendent’s Convention.

Networking

- OSSA is the distributor of Small Talk, a newsletter published three times a year and sent free to member schools. Small Talk provides general information of interest to small schools, and features small school programs, events and achievements.
- Meet other Oregon small school administrators to share best practices, lessons learned and ideas.



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Small schools can make PLCs successful

By: **Joyce Garland**, OSSA Teacher of the Year

When Sheridan School District introduced Professional Learning Communities to us, I groaned, wondering what was coming our way. But it turns out that PLCs aren't really such a bad deal for teachers. PLCs offer the potential to change school climate and allow teachers to grow in their profession, no matter how many years they have been working.

A highly functional PLC pulls teachers out of the cocoon of their classrooms and demands interaction with peers, upgrading and refining curriculum, cooperating with common and cross-curricular teams, and improving education for all students. PLCs ask for an open dialogue between educators in order to focus on what is most necessary to produce a consistent, challenging curriculum that offers a rigorous and relevant education to every student.

After researching PLCs, I discovered that I agreed wholeheartedly with the premise of them and wanted to learn more. In November 2008, a coworker and I attended PLC training in Seattle and we came to the conclusion that this method can cause lasting and meaningful change. We approached Dr. Bob Eaker (one of the founders of PLCs) and asked if he knew of any small school models we could follow. He thought he did, but it turned out that our definition of small schools was vastly different. (He defined small schools as 600-1,000 students while we were thinking of our high school with 220 students). We continued to read, research, and gather what information we could, then decided that whether or not a small school model existed, there were many things that our school could

learn from existing PLCs. We returned to Sheridan High School on a mission: We wanted to see our staff embrace the concept behind PLCs and become a highly-functioning team that moved our students consistently towards excellence.

The high school staff began to build its PLC in earnest during the 2009-2010 school year. We soon realized that curriculum teams wouldn't really work for us, since many of us are the only teacher in our curriculum areas or teach multiple subjects. We decided to divide our teaching staff into two teams of seven and meet in those groups on a weekly basis. Eventually, we refined our goals and objectives and began to make some real changes in our curriculum and methods of delivery.

Today we continue to build our version of a small school PLC. Sheridan High School earned a rating of "Outstanding" from the state of Oregon last year, and our students are performing at a higher level than before. We built a schedule that allows our students extra time with teachers, aligned our curriculum to state standards, and have begun to create school-wide common assessments in reading and writing. Through the process, we have learned more about each other and what happens in our classrooms. As a result, we are more unified in our discipline, curriculum, and grading criteria, and the student body is reaping the benefits.

Joyce Garland is a history teacher at Sheridan High School in Sheridan, Ore. She is the 2010-2011 OSSA Teacher of the Year.

Contribute to *Small Talk*!

Have something you'd like to see in *Small Talk*? Send your story ideas, articles and photos to OSSA Executive Secretary Edie Allstott.

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Award hits high note for local music teacher

Note: This article originally appeared in the Jan. 26, 2011, edition of the Blue Mountain Eagle and has been reprinted with permission from the newspaper.

By: Angel Carpenter, Blue Mountain Eagle

EUGENE – Louise Kienzle, music teacher at Humbolt Elementary School in Canyon City, has won a state music education award.

She received a plaque for the 2011 Excellence in Elementary Music Education Award on Jan. 15, at the Oregon Music Educators Association State Conference in Eugene.

Kienzle teaches music to grades kindergarten through fifth at Humbolt.

“It always feels good to be acknowledged for what you do,” she said, “but I don’t feel like I do more than other teachers. All teachers put in extra efforts to help their kids. I feel that my job is to expose them to lots of different kinds of music and ways that music is expressed.”



Children taught by Kienzle at Humbolt do have a variety of musical opportunities, including performing in the yearly Dr. Seuss Day musical event in March and the Voices for Africa program in April last year. Kienzle was instrumental in bringing the world-renowned musical group Synergy to Humbolt last April and she also directs the annual Christmas program.

Kienzle introduces a new song to her students weekly, each one featuring a different genre of music. Kienzle’s connection with music continues outside the classroom.

After school she volunteers time directing the Grant County Children’s Choir, twice a week at the United Methodist Church.

She spearheads the Eastern Oregon Children’s Choir Festival held yearly at Eastern Oregon University with help from Peter Wordleman, choral director and music professor at EOU.

She’s also a 14-year member of the local Juniper Singers group and is president of the Juniper Arts Council, an organization that promotes the arts in Grant County.

Kienzle’s nomination for the award came from Holly Bentz of John Day. All of her five children have had Kienzle for a music teacher.

Bentz says she feels that music is an important subject for children to have in school for their overall success as students.

“I think the fact that she is willing to go above and beyond to make sure that kids have more opportunities in music deserves recognition,” Bentz said. “To put together a choir on your volunteer time with third- through eighth-graders – to me that’s huge. That’s something that not just anybody would be willing or able to do.”

Legislative updates available online

With the Legislative session in full swing, many school folks may have questions about proposed legislative measures related to schools and the proposed state budget. OSSA is here to help! OSSA members can find links to the current legislative session and education-related bills, as well as school revenue forecasts, on the OSSA web site, www.oregonssa.org. Just click on the “Legislative Updates” menu tab at the top of the page.

It's all about classroom instruction

By: **Pat Sharp**, Superintendent, Crane School District

Dr. Kevin Feldman, the director of reading and intervention for the Sonoma County Office of Education and an independent educational consultant, visited Harney County in November, spending the day in Crane working with teachers and administrators from Burns and Crane school districts.

Dr. Feldman is the lead trainer for the Student Engagement in Content Area Literacy Project. This project is funded through a grant administered by the Harney, High Desert, Lake, and Jefferson County Education Service Districts, the Oregon Data Project, and Oregon Direct Access to Achievement. The project is designed to support teachers and administrators with research-based instructional strategies and implementation techniques designed for middle school and high school classrooms. Local participants in the project include teachers and the administrators from Hines Middle School, Burns High School, Crane Elementary School, and Crane Union High School.

The primary focus of the project is to improve adolescent literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening across secondary classrooms and content areas. Teachers and administrators participating in the project are collaborating by committing to using effective teaching strategies, spending time in each others' classrooms giving and receiving feedback on their use of these strategies, and collecting and analyzing data on classroom observations. Terms such as "Everybody does Everything," and "Robust



Crane staff work with Dr. Feldman.
Contributed photo.

Instruction" are providing a framework in many Harney County classrooms as teachers focus on actively engaging all students, teaching the use of the academic vocabulary inherent in all content areas, and structuring the use of higher order thinking skills.

In Crane, Dr. Feldman and project participants spent the day observing in middle school and high school classrooms, with everyone providing and receiving feedback on the implementation of strategies and collaborating on the project's progress. The visit to Crane is the first of two visits Dr. Feldman will make to Harney County. In April, Literacy Project participants will gather in middle and high school classrooms in Burns to repeat this process.

Proficiency at Central Linn

By: **Alix Stinnett**, Work Experience Program Director, Americorps*VISTA, Central Linn School District

Proficiency is the new buzzword here at Central Linn. Central Linn's Site Council has been working on a proficiency approach in the high school, sending several faculty members to proficiency-based training through the Business Education Compact (BEC). Last spring, Central Linn adopted proficiency standards in Senior Project to meet the new 2012 diploma requirements of demonstrating proficiency in four essential skills standards, but this is just the start.

In the fall of 2010, Central Linn submitted a grant for an AmeriCorps*VISTA to work on building the framework for a Work-Based Learning Program (WBLP) for 11th and 12th grade students. Students enrolled in the WBLP are placed at a worksite in the community for high school credit. The WBLP expands the walls of the classroom and opens up opportunities for students to get involved in their

communities, build job skills, beef up their resumés and earn proficiency credit. Each WBLP student will develop goals and objectives that meet the worksite's job description, Industry-Based Knowledge and Skill sets depending on the project, and the competency requirements by the school. Both a Teacher of Record and Central Linn's Site Council will assess progress of each student throughout the duration of the student's involvement.

Central Linn's Work-Based Learning Program pilot is scheduled to start at the beginning of 2011. There has been a great deal of community support for this program, and Central Linn has established four projects with three businesses and institutions in the area: the City of Brownsville, Brownsville' Public Library, and Thompson Mills State Heritage Park.

Foreign exchange students enhance educational experience for Central Linn students & community

By: **Julie Knoedler**, Principal Central Linn Jr.-Sr. High School

Over the years, Central Linn High School students, as groups or as individuals, have left lasting contributions to future generations of students and to the community. As a part of senior project class, many students have done community service projects that have enhanced school grounds or facilities. Rooms have been painted; display cases built, benches, gardens, a patio, and even a time capsule are some of the legacies left by past students. When completed, each project was admired and appreciated, but this year, the contribution of one student warranted an unveiling and public dedication. The circumstances were unique and the project was spectacular.

The 40-foot Cobra Dome Mural looms high above the gym floor, with striking cobra and lightning bolts. It threatens athletic opponents and strengthens the home team. But the student artist, who used over 80 cans of spray paint and spent over 40 hours on the project, is far from a hometown boy. Mathias Hansen is a foreign exchange student from Denmark. At Central Linn for just three months before sharing his talents and training with the community, Mathias proposed the project first to school administration and then to the school board, who welcomed the idea.

Immediately after the school board meeting, a teacher in attendance donated \$100 for supplies. The



Associated Student Body Government held a fundraiser and the work began within two weeks. Mathias completed the project before the first home basketball game and the Cobra was presented to the cheers of a full Cobra Dome.

At the end of this school year, Mathias and the six other exchange students (four boys and three girls total) from around the world will return to their homes far away, but the impact of their visit will be felt, and seen, for years to come. As we welcome different cultures into our community we are enriched by the perspectives and talents of those individuals who have come to the United States to learn more about us. It is my sincere hope that they take away as much as they have given.

Mt. Vernon shows it 'I-CAREs'

By: **Andy Lusco**, Teacher, Mt. Vernon Middle School

The Mt. Vernon Middle School staff is excited to begin a process of encouraging positive behaviors through the I-CARE program. This acronym stands for Integrity, Compassion, Attitude, Respect, and Excellence. It is the guiding principle behind newly-defined behavioral expectations for students and staff.

The staff has attempted to identify key concepts of positive behavior in the I-CARE matrix. These concepts will be taught throughout the school year and incorporated into daily interactions with students in the classroom and on campus. The goal is to be proactive by modeling and reinforcing positive and desired behaviors rather than waiting for misbehavior to occur. By creating a common frame of reference and specific language (matrix) and teaching the specific desired behavior the staff can be much more consistent and eliminate "loopholes."

Furthermore, the positive communication with parents generated by mailing the I-CARE cards home has been

beneficial in the classroom and around campus. Each student who earns an I-CARE card is entered into a drawing. The weekly, quarterly, and yearly prize drawings serve to reward and recognize what is going right at MVMS, and proving to students that doing the right thing can be rewarding.



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For a current list of district
vacancies log on to
www.oregonssa.org/vacancies



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Retaining this increased funding for small high schools is a critical issue for the continuation of small schools.

- **Student Transportation Grant.** Frequently, small schools though not large in student count cover an enormous geographic area. The current student transportation formulas accommodate this fact.
- **Foreign Exchange Students.** Some small schools host a number of foreign exchange students in a dormitory setting. The students provide a sense of diversity and add richness to the local student population. For the smallest and most remote schools this, in some form, is a necessity.
- **Education Service Districts.** None of the school districts in the state are as dependent on services from local ESDs as small districts. It would be impossible to serve some of their students without the support they receive from ESDs. It would also be impossible for small school districts to deliver many mandated instructional services and programs to students without the support provided to them by their local ESD. The Oregon Small Schools Association would support the transfer of major functions from the Oregon Department of Education to Education Service Districts.