

Spotlight on Success: Pendleton High School

*"I just like to come to school. I feel good about myself when I'm here."*¹

Pendleton High School (PHS) is located in the northeast corner of the state of Oregon, nestled up against the Umatilla Indian Reservation. This town of just over 16,000 people stakes its claim to fame through the Pendleton Roundup, which draws 50,000 visitors each September. Much of the town's history is connected to the Oregon Trail and the Old West. It is also known as the home of Pendleton Woolen Mills. PHS is the only high school serving the Pendleton School District; there are also five elementary schools and one middle school in the district. The school itself is home to 980 students, grades 9-12. There were 47 full time teachers and 78 staff.



Tom Lovell has been the principal of Pendleton High School for 4 years. Previous to this position,



he was the assistant principal at PHS for five years. Lori Albright, who has spent 13 years at PHS as the French and Spanish teacher and is now President of the teacher's union, agrees with Principal Tom Lovell's motto: What's best for the kids. "I really feel that Tom has a lot to do with what is going on in the high school," she said. "He weekly reminds us to do what's best for the kids and to make connections with them." In addition to helping them succeed academically, teachers showed concern for their students in other ways. "Teaching isn't about getting up there and having them regurgitate what I say," claimed special education teacher Beth Smith. "It's about caring for the kids."

Mark Christensen sees things the same way. Both in his former capacity as math teacher and his current positions as coach and Weight Training teacher, Christensen has always strived to put the kids first. When asked what he felt was good about Pendleton, he replied, "The relationship between the staff and students."

Students tended to agree. Mason, a senior who plans to attend the University of Oregon this fall and eventually work on a doctorate, is currently employed with a wireless internet company, where he is a trainer. In addition to his job and his school work, he was teaching himself French in his spare time. When asked his views on what was working at PHS, Mason replied without hesitation, "The teachers."

¹ Travis (Student)

What's working? Key Components to Success

Programs and Projects

ASPIRE program. The *Access to Student Assistance Programs In Reach of Everyone* (ASPIRE) is an Oregon-based program that “seeks to provide Oregon high school students solid pathways beyond high school. ASPIRE matches trained community volunteers with high school students to provide one-on-one mentoring. The ASPIRE Advisors guide students through the process of applying for college, financial aid, and scholarships.”² This very active program, designed to help students plan for success beyond high school, is run by two retired persons who started out being paid only enough to cover their insurance. While they now share one salary between the two of them, the rest of the ASPIRE staff includes 35 volunteers.

Open half days, 4 days a week, the ASPIRE program matches kids with adults who help them through the steps they need to take in order to succeed. While they started out focused only on college-bound seniors who intended to go to four-years of college, they have been able to expand in order to work with those headed for community college and even juniors and sophomores. This year alone, the school was able to give out \$2.3 million in scholarship money. “Our ASPIRE program is amazing,” said Tom Lovell. “It all goes back to . . . the work they do with these kids.”

Pendleton High School has agreements with Blue Mountain Community College and Walla Walla Community College to offer numerous classes that are taught on the PHS campus and afford students the ability to receive college credits while still in high school.

Health Occupations. Three years ago, Mr. Lovell asked the four health teachers to research a region of Oregon’s 4A schools, to discover what was being taught around the state. Health Occupations came in first place. Sports Medicine and Sports Psychology also seemed to be appealing to plenty of students in other schools. Lovell and his staff decided to add these classes to their schedule, putting extra thought into making course titles relevant to students, such as Wellness, Body Toning, Recreational Games, and Sports Medicine. Other course titles include: Project Citizen, Animation and Computer, A+ Computer Repair, 3D Design, Working with Exceptional Children, Introduction to Vet Science, and The Stock Market.



Dale Freeman, a certified PE and Health teacher, began teaching the Health Occupations class. “I’m so glad I did,” he said. “It has really re-energized me.” He spoke with enthusiasm about recently taking nine students to a job shadowing program through St. Anthony’s Hospital. “They are calling it Imagine Imagery Night.” He noted that the new diploma requirement of gaining career related learning experiences is forcing teachers to look outside their normal curriculum and to find ways to connect students with real-life situations. The new system allows students to see concrete ways in which what they are learning is going to affect them.

² ASPIRE website: <http://www.aspireoregon.org/about.html>

Both the community and the administration highly support Freeman's efforts to get students out into the community, which include not only the job shadowing but also a recent trip with 67 students from the Sports Medicine class to see OMSI's Body Worlds exhibit.

But it's not all head knowledge Mr. Freeman is giving his students. Freeman is pleased that his classes seem to be making a concrete difference in student's lives. In his Individual and Team Sports class, he tries to get students to participate in activities they wouldn't ordinary find in a PE curriculum, such as snowshoeing, mountain biking and rock climbing, "The kids who really buy into that stuff are our high risk kids," he said. And one former student who lost 50 pounds while enrolled in his Wellness class, came back to report, "I am healthy because of you."

Weight Training and Conditioning. This huge project wouldn't be possible without a lot of support from the public. Previously crowded into a small, hot space, few students wanted to make use of the school's weight training program. The Booster Club and the athletic director saw a need and initiated a remodel. Their now air-conditioned facility, furnished with new equipment purchased through grants and donations from the community, allows up to 50 students to use the weight room at a time. By opening at 6:30 in the morning, Mark Christensen is able to work with 342 students in the course of any given day.

The benefits are obvious. "A few years ago a young lady was struggling with self-esteem," Christensen reports. "We got her involved and doing more physically. It helped her out and probably affected her academics. When kids are active in the morning, it helps out the rest of their day." Undoubtedly, the rise in her self-esteem played a part in her overall improvement at school.



Clubs and Student Activities. Pendleton High School had a long list of active clubs. Any student at PHS was free to start a club by submitting a purpose statement and securing a staff member to act as their advisor. One of the largest groups was Future Farmers of America (FFA), which is not surprising, given that Pendleton is a rural ranching area. Three service clubs are also very active: Key Club, National Honors Society, and ASTRA (a subgroup of Altrusa, an all-woman organization). Around 85 PHS students were involved in the local branch. Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) also had about 30 members.

The Sparrow Club was new this year. Members picked a child in the community who was facing a life threatening disease. The national organization finds local businesses to provide opportunities for service to these children. Then the businesses make a donation on behalf of this family rather than paying the kids for their work. "I like this group," said Lovell, "because they really try to get everybody involved, everybody from the skaters to the chess club."

Throughout the year, various activities give students the opportunity to participate in supporting their school and community. Penny Wars encourage classes to compete to see who can bring in the most pennies, with the proceeds going to Doernbechers Children Hospital. And the all-female, staff vs. student Mud Wars, which replace the traditional powder puff football of homecoming, has proven to be the largest fundraiser of the year.

Chelsea was one of the students who was actively involved in PHS clubs and activities. In addition to helping with fundraisers such as the Mr. PHS Pageant and the Winter Formal, she was involved

with the Festival of Trees. She also kept busy with Key Club, which educates young people on how to make a difference in their world. In addition to raising money for children both at Doernbecher and in Uganda, members also sent care packages to the soldiers in Iraq. When asked why she was involved in organizing these events, Chelsea replied simply, "I want to help ... make life better for people outside this school."

The staff is always looking for other ways to involve students as well. "About half of our kids are involved in sports," said Mr. Lovell, "but quite a few aren't. And not everyone wants to be in a service club, so we still need something for those kids."

To try to reach as many people as possible, the site council organizes one huge event a year and classes are suspended for a day. Last year's event involved a career fair with 150 people from community businesses attending. The year before that, they organized Living History Day, in which veterans from different wars came in to talk or be with students. Speakers included a Holocaust survivor and a Navaho Code Talker. Plans for the next big project include some type of multicultural celebration or Diversity Day.

Mentoring. This program, which connects high school students with adults in the community, also ties high school students to the local elementary school. Mentors have lunch with the children or take them out to do something after school. Some high school students were involved in the CADET program and obtained credit through Blue Mountain Community College. About 10-15 students were involved in this grant-supported program.

Academic support and interventions

Teachers and administrators at Pendleton High School were concerned about meeting students where they were and in whatever circumstances brought them to PHS. One way they showed this was by having a class especially designed for the nearly 100 Native American students in the school, led by the Native American counselor. The administration also gets actively involved to support students who are struggling academically.

Education Credit Management Corporation (ECMC). According to the ECMC website, this program helps low-income, first-generation college-going students further their educational goals.³ At PHS it intercepts sophomores who are in danger of dropping out. The staff nominate students they feel are bright but underachieving. Last year, ten of these students were selected to be in a special cohort of students. They met separately for part of the day but were incorporated into the high school classes and activities the rest of the day. As part of the program, they learned study skills and job skills. They visited colleges, learned teamwork, and helped each other with personal problems. When the students successfully complete the program and graduate, they are given scholarship money through the ECMC Foundation (<http://www.ecmcfoundation.org/>). They are granted \$4,000 for their first year of post-secondary education and \$2,000 for the second. (The high school also works with them to secure other college funding whenever they can.)

Jacob Murray, now a senior, is one such student who said he benefitted from the ECMC program. After struggling through his freshman year, he was identified for the ECMC program his sophomore year, and joined during his junior year. The fourth of five brothers, he is the first one

³ ECMC website: <http://www.ecmcfoundation.org/>

who will graduate from high school. (One other has a GED; none of them made it to their senior year.) Jacob said his brothers didn't feel the need for education, and he had little academic support or pressure to do any better. Largely because of the homework help provided to program participants, Jacob has been able to raise his grades to B's and C's. Instructors also helped him file a FAFSA, which got him an additional \$5,000 in financial aid. He plans to use the tuition dollars when he starts in Blue Mountain Community College's diesel tech program this fall. When he turns 21, he plans to become a state trooper, but he feels that the diesel tech program will provide him with a reliable backup plan. "I really needed the mentoring at first," Jacob said, "but the longer I'm in the program, the less I feel like I need it. And that is good."



Reading class. In the fall of 2007, special education teacher Beth Smith started a reading program that improves reading skills through content area lessons. There were 78 students enrolled (some special education students, but most simply identified by teachers, TESA scores, oral reading scores, composition scores, or state testing). Smith saw an urgent need to expand, and Tom Lovell agreed with her. Teachers and students alike were enthusiastic in their support of this program as they saw reading levels rise.

While they are not certain which program they will use next year, PHS is currently using Achieve 3000. It's expensive, admitted administrator Marcia Walters, who sees a component of literacy in art, social studies, language arts, science and music. She added, "But it's not as expensive as our students not knowing how to read."

During this last year, five teachers were actively involved in this program, which begins with a placement test that assigns each student a Lexile score. The teacher then assigns content specific lessons at the student's reading level. "We don't ask the teachers to teach 'a reading lesson,'" explains Smith. "We ask them to use their own materials to teach reading skills within what they're already doing."

Smith, who regularly tracks individual progress, claimed that five solid readings generally moved a student up a level, although she generally discussed that decision with each person before moving him or her up. Eventually, she hopes to expand into regular classroom settings to increase literacy within content areas, even with AP kids. And she's working to coordinate the work at the high school with the middle school so that students can be reached for intervention even sooner.

Learning lab. Students at PHS were also being served by credit retrieval services and an intervention program which pulled out students who were in math. Even ASB (Associated Student Body) officer Chelsea had benefited from the extra tutoring that was offered morning and afternoon. "Math is the class I struggle with the most," she admits, "but I'm doing okay because I'm taking advantage of the extra help."

Student recognition. Students at PHS deserve to be recognized. The school is proud of its honors diploma, accelerated grading scale, and academic awards assemblies. "These are all things that we started two years ago," said Lovell, "but they have withstood the test of time, and we're still doing them. We continue to meet and ask ourselves how we can improve on them, so we are constantly tweaking and adjusting."

Recognizing student effort and achievement is an ongoing process that involves all of the teachers and attempts to reach as many students as possible. Once each semester, the school hosts an Awards Night, during which students are recognized in the presence of their parents and peers. Those who don't have the highest grades can still be recognized for attendance or effort, among other things. Beth Smith, who keeps a list in a binder, strives to make sure that each student is recognized at least once during the year. She tries to give them concrete awards, like spaghetti feed tickets. Many other teachers do similar things. The Leadership class also helps boost individual and community morale with their student recognition banners, service opportunities, and class competitions. "There's something for everyone here," said Smith.



Professional Development

New teacher mentors. For the first time this year, new teachers were matched with mentors from their own departments. Three times over the course of the year they met at the district office to help facilitate their transition into the school.

Curriculum Mapping. Each teacher at PHS has completed mapping the content, skills and assessments used for each class they teach, using a commercial, internet-based mapping tool called ATLAS. The goal this year is for all teachers to map one more class, and by the end of next year to have all classes mapped.

"One of the reasons for curriculum mapping," explains Lori Albright, "is to purposefully tie into the Oregon career standards and graduation requirements. The school sees this as a way to try to integrate with state standards and with the middle school in an effort to make our secondary education a cohesive unit. Carol Blanc, [our] biology teacher, totally revamped her curriculum to meet state standards. Not every teacher is willing to do that. I like change though. I can never teach something the same way twice." Mr. Christensen also agreed that one of the best things about PHS is its curriculum planning.

Alignment with Middle School staff - department meetings. Tom Lovell is encouraged by the progress toward aligning with the middle school staff. "We have only had one meeting, but have been talking about it for two years," he said. "It's finally happening. We met by department, had some questions prepared, and now most departments have developed their own agendas for the next meeting. All it takes is someone to schedule the meetings—no money."

Re-doing graduation requirements. Students were currently required to have a Personalized Education Plan, as well as complete the Career Related Learning Standards (CRLS) requirement. Last fall, PHS staff spent two months meeting with departments in order to figure out how they would meet the Oregon new diploma requirements. They were analyzing what classes they wanted to offer and require in the future, in order to maximize student learning at the same time as meet the state requirements. They have a proposal for the school board for next year and will continue to examine and look at their requirements, which will involve all students and all teachers. Mark Christensen would like to see PE incorporated into the CRLS, but overall, the school is happy with the way things are trending. Even students Chelsea and Travis acknowledged

the value of the new standards, which allowed them to feel like they were making connections to the future.

But there is still plenty of work to be done. Tom Lovell remembers asking his staff what was getting in the way of their ability to do their job. In addition to a need for more technology, the teachers mentioned the fact that only about 50-60% of their students were passing the reading assessment. Last year, when that issue surfaced again, the Literacy Committee was formed. Originally the committee included reading at the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels. But they eventually reorganized and the Secondary Literacy Committee was formed. At the same time, there was an opportunity for a grant tied with RTI (Response to Intervention). PHS took advantage of the grant to send some people to a workshop addressing secondary literacy that Bethel School District near Eugene was putting on.

Equipping and energizing the teachers was an ongoing project for Mr. Lovell, as demonstrated by his *Monday Thoughts*, a letter he wrote every Sunday night to his staff. "I remind them that we are in this for the kids, that we need to do what is best for them, not what is easiest for us," he said.

Benefits to PHS when high school is "working"

Because of the student-centered focus and the administrative support the teachers receive, Pendleton High School is a positive and productive learning environment. As Dale Freeman put it, "I've worked in a gas station, was in the Air Force, did logging. But no job I've ever had has excited me like this. That's why I'm still here." Lori Albright agrees. "I love teaching. It's the best job in the world."

"I can leave here in the evening and know that I've impacted somebody's life," added Beth Smith. "I feel like I've made a difference, whether I'm giving someone a dollar for lunch, or helping them with an assignment, or pairing up a couple of people so that someone feels smart, or simply saying hello in the hallways. I want them to know that I'm human, too. I tell the kids, 'I'm here every day. It would be nice if you were [also].'"

And for the most part, they are. As student Travis stated, "I just like to come to school. I feel good about myself when I'm here."

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This story was written by Ginny Birky, PhD, from George Fox University as a sabbatical leave project and in partnership with Oregon Department of Education. On February 20, 2008 11 people were interviewed with the overarching question, "What works for kids at Pendleton High School?" Participants included the principal, assistant principal, administrative assistant, four teachers, and four students. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The story was written based on the perceptions and representations of what the participants said related to what was working and why. Every effort was made to portray the perspectives of those interviewed to get an accurate picture of what Pendleton High School was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.