

Spotlight on Success: North Eugene High School

“We’re experiencing more ownership of the school and more personalization. Hopefully [we’re] changing the climate so that the kids realize this school belongs to them and their parents and their community.”¹

North Eugene High School (NEHS) is one of four comprehensive high schools in the Eugene (OR) School District 4J, with additional magnet and alternative schools available to Eugene students. There are just under 1000 students at NEHS.



Laurie Henry is the campus principal and works with each of the three small school principals; she is finishing her second year at NEHS. Laurie has been an educator with the Eugene School District 4J for 33 years, first as an elementary teacher and learning specialist. She was later an administrator at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. A lot of Laurie Henry’s background involved work with at-risk and low income students. She sees herself as an instructional leader because she believes one of her strengths is around instruction. She said, “It’s really exciting to have teachers coming to learn how to differentiate learning rather than just teaching content and hoping the kids get it.”



What’s working? Key Components to Success

Small Learning Communities

North Eugene High School is in their second year of housing three small schools within one larger school. E3:OSSI (Oregon Small Schools Initiative), funded by the Meyer Memorial Trust and the Gates Foundation, provided initial funding to convert the comprehensive high school to the small schools model. There are three small learning communities of approximately 70-100 students. Each has strong core academic offerings incorporated into a unique focus on teaching and learning styles as well as specific career experiences. For example, one school is project-based and has very little direct instruction. Another has an international focus with more history and social studies, resulting in more direct instruction while also including several innovative projects. The third school is based on integrated instruction with art infused into all areas of the curriculum.

All three schools offer a rigorous and relevant college prep curriculum designed to prepare each student for college, career, and civic engagement. All of the small schools have course offerings in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and/or College Now programs whereby students can earn college credit while still in high school.

¹ Laurie Henry, Principal

Based on student preferences and a lottery system, students were assigned to one of three small schools in the spring of 2006. A similar process is used each spring for entering ninth graders. The schools are as follows:

- *North Eugene Academy of the Arts (NEAA)*. In this small school, arts are the center of integrated studies that focus on relationships in concert with academic content. Art based strategies engage students in rigorous learning across content areas to prepare them for college. The school combines arts and academics in a way in which the two support and complement each other. This combination creates a powerful learning experience, using the arts as a web to unite all areas of curriculum.

NEAA has a partnership with Lane Community College. Because of a grant through LCC, several artists come into the classroom and work with the teachers to incorporate some kind of art into the content that is being taught. Artists have been integrated not just into literature and social studies but also into chemistry and integrated science, bringing a new level of exploration and learning to the classroom. Twice a year, LCC hosts a symposium which allows NEAA to meet with other participating schools and to share their projects.

- *North International High School (NIHS)* “focuses on creating a globally-aware student through an integrated international studies program; in the upper grade levels, an IB program is offered in the humanities, math, science, and world languages.” Students participate in an “interdisciplinary study of global cultures, beliefs, history, literature, art, language, information technology, science, and mathematics.”²

In the other Eugene international high school, the teachers are itinerant and move between schools. NIHS is different, granting the students the same teachers all day, every day. Another distinguishing factor is that the international program in NIHS is designed to meet the needs of all types of students. They welcome special education, English Language Learners, and students who, due to the reputation of the other International Baccalaureate program in the district, might not have ever considered pursuing this focus of their high school learning. A global focus helps all students to become 21st century citizens.

- *School of IDEAS (Invention, Designs, Engineering, Arts, and Science)* is a place where a “serious learning environment engages students to be active learners.”² Project-based curriculum with a real-world, hands-on approach is the norm, helping each student see the relevance in their work. Team teaching is part of the IDEAS model. “Teachers collaborate and teach courses together whenever possible so that students can see the connections between subject areas.”² In addition, technology is a tool used extensively in this small school.

Projects create the process for students’ learning. The students have to be able to express what they know and to evaluate what they need to learn. They also have to be able to devise a plan to acquire the information they need. Teamwork is paramount, and the students are graded on their abilities to function as team players as well as on their effort, work ethic, and other life skills that they bring to the project.

Clair Wiles, teacher for IDEAS, explained that each project lasts 2-3 weeks. For one project, students in American Studies prepared and performed a debate on whether or not we should celebrate Columbus Day. Because the teachers recognized the importance of an audience, they invited the school board and city council members to attend.

Another project involved a much different format and type of audience. The students were split into groups of four and each of them was assigned to interview one of 40 international students who were attending the University of Oregon. Then each group of students created a National Geographic look-a-like of their country. They had to have a cover, biography, political and physical maps, report of the country's environmental issues, and an evolution of the government and its impact on environmental issues and disasters. Because of technology, Clair Wiles, who is in her tenth year at NEHS, said the students were able to create a final product that was virtually indistinguishable from a real National Geographic. When they had finished, the international students came back to help grade the projects and to provide feedback.

Each small school has a teacher leader who is responsible for helping staff develop the vision and the strategies necessary to make these ideas a reality. Each teacher leader functions as a facilitator for staff meetings and is in charge of setting agendas and record-keeping. Clair Wiles said, "The teacher leader is pretty much someone [at the] grassroots [level] who . . . helps us through the transition. It's the idea that we're working together as a team rather than having somebody in charge." Distributive leadership is a key component of the small school model, and teacher leadership is evident in all three of the small schools on the North Eugene campus.

Getting started. For Bob Cunningham, who has been teaching learning disabled and emotionally disturbed students at NEHS for the last 19 years, the news that his small school, NIHS, was identified as one that is working for students came as no surprise. This wasn't always the case, however. About a dozen years ago, an increasing number of referrals, suspensions and dropouts made it evident that the system was not working for a number of students throughout the traditional comprehensive high school campus. Also, attendance was down, as were test scores. Some students were still faring well, but many others including the at-risk, special education, and ELL populations were floundering.

Clair Wiles, then teacher of freshman honors and global studies, crunched through ten years of transcripts to help determine how many of their students were graduating college-ready. "I came up with about 15-20%," she said. "I took that pile of transcripts to a staff meeting and said, 'Tell me you feel good about letting this kid graduate. Tell me you see any future for him besides standing in the welfare line.' At the time we had very low requirements. For example, the students had to have two years of math, but it could be pre-algebra. We were graduating them based on the minimum Oregon graduation requirements, but we weren't preparing them to be successful in college readiness, which by current standards also means they were not ready for most career options, nor for involved civic engagement. This awareness became our motivation for change."



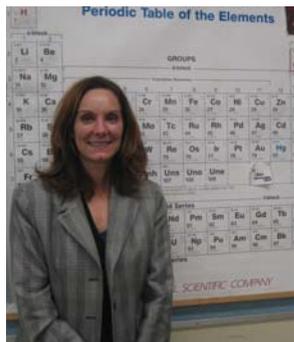
NEHS started the change process by analyzing what other campuses were already doing that was working for them. Selection for an Oregon Small Schools Initiative Grant from E3: Employers for

Education Excellence allowed the entire staff to go in groups of 6-8 people to visit schools and conversion campuses around the nation. Upon their return, they shared what they had learned in staff meetings. Bob Cunningham went to two schools in Chicago. The first, a comprehensive high school campus of 4500 students and 450 staff, impressed him deeply. The large numbers were broken into smaller pods of 800 students, with an assistant principal, counselor, special ed teacher, and social worker responsible only for that pod. Upon graduation, an average of 92% of those students went on to college.

Witnessing schools like this one prompted the staff to sit down at the end of the year and draw up their own proposals. Not all of the teachers were thrilled with the changes at the outset. The administration remained open to allowing anyone who preferred to do so the ability to transfer to another school within the district with a great letter of recommendation. A few chose to leave, but most teachers stayed to work on the transition to small schools in order to make a difference for all students on the North Eugene campus.

Even among those who remained, not all were confident at first that these measures they had witnessed around the country were going to be successful in their own backyard. Bob himself admitted that while actively involved in the process, he had “a rather cynical attitude . . . I kept going to their meetings,” he said, “and telling them that their classes were going to change significantly by adding IEP and ELL students. They got tired of hearing it and just asked me to join them. I decided that maybe I wasn’t giving them enough credit.” Time proved the truth of that statement, and Bob admits that he has been quite pleased with the way the teachers have adapted to having a more mixed population within their classes. “They really care about all the kids and are willing to go out of their way to help each one.” Though Bob, like others, had to be convinced, he is now a total supporter of small schools even to the point of sharing that perspective in a presentation to the Eugene School Board.

While faculty at NEHS were open to many different ideas, at first the notion was to create Small Learning Communities, similar but less revolutionary than small schools. The availability of a federal Small Learning Communities grant encouraged them to look most intently in that direction. Claire Wiles herself was initially opposed to breaking North into small schools. She saw the problem with the old system, but wasn’t sure this change was the solution. However, because the principal asked her to do so, she went to look at Tacoma’s system and came back so enthused that she ended up giving up half of her teaching time to become the official School Change Coordinator for the Oregon Small School Initiative grant (a position she held for one and half years until she was recalled to Iraq in 2006).



Tia Halliday, who is in her ninth year as chemistry teacher and currently serves as the teacher leader in the Academy of the Arts, claimed that the transition forced them to be more focused. The staff realized that opportunities, in themselves, did not create a great school if the students didn’t feel connected enough to plug in and participate. So they chose to embrace smaller, more individualized programs and to create those vital connections they felt would allow students to succeed. Several proposals for small schools were submitted and in the end, staff, parents, and students made the final decision.

Small School Structure at NEHS. Transitioning from one large school to three smaller schools couldn't happen by itself. Casandra Kamens, who has been at NEHS for 10 years, reduced her French teaching schedule to half-time so that she could take over the role of Small School Coordinator after Clair Wiles. While her job now involves a lot of paperwork for the grant that makes the program possible, her primary purpose is to be the contact person whenever something occurs in one of the small schools that would affect the others. While each school has its own leadership team consisting of a principal, counselor, and a teacher leader, Casandra is the link that ties the teams together. She oversees, among other things, the placement and transfer of students, space issues, and data analysis. She and the other teacher leaders and administrators work and collaborate to promote equity of curriculum and instruction to improve school achievement across the three schools.



While Casandra is the “in-school presence,” Campus Principal, Laurie Henry is more active at the district level while still supervising all aspects of the conversion process and educational practices throughout the North campus. “They view me as ‘the Voice of North,’” she said. “Casandra has to plan and coordinate so we can move forward into strong small schools. My task is to take care of all the little pieces to free up the small schools’ principals so that we *can* move forward.” She also orchestrates all the big picture things from middle school articulation to athletics so that the rest of the staff can focus on instruction, curriculum, change in the classroom, and the structure of their small school. “I work around facility building and with our maintenance folks to free up the other principals for instruction and redesign and development,” she said. By meeting regularly with administrators and teachers, Laurie works collaboratively to guide the day-to-day operations and future planning simultaneously.

Ms. Henry *is* still the principal. “If one of the small school’s principals is dealing with a family who is not satisfied with the way things are working out, then it comes up to my level,” she said. Casandra is a change agent; I am an administrator But it’s really a collaborative effort. North Eugene is used to using collaborative decision making. . . . The principal has to be the vision keeper and keep things moving forward with that in mind.”

Two weekly meetings (which are sometimes attended by a small schools coach from E3:OSSI) help keep the gateways of communication open between the schools. “We try to be as autonomous as we can,” Casandra said, “and that takes planning and coordination.” (Each small school can function however they want to in order to meet student needs, but some decisions are best left for now at the campus level including the current decision to stay on the same bell schedule.)

An hour late start every Wednesday allows the small schools a regular time to have a staff meeting or do some training or work on Professional Learning Communities. Every other month the three small schools get together for an all-campus staff meeting to ensure effective communication and networking.

The leadership team meets regularly as well to discuss budgeting, enrollment, and programs to help increase student achievement. “We have to decide if something is really going to help [our students], or if we’re just doing things because that’s the way we’ve always done them,” admits Laurie. She is proud of the fact that Eugene is famous for grassroots ideas. “Teachers support what they create,” she said. “We work very hard at being a team.”

Laurie points to the need for teamwork so that one small school's successes can be shared and used as a model by the others. For example, NIHS's total inclusion and their use of Bob Cunningham as a resource for all students and teachers has been held up in staff meetings "as a model of what could/should be. We all learn from each other," Laurie stresses. "That's the difference between management and leadership. Management tells people what to do; leadership builds up the moral imperative to get it done." Laurie continued, "I think we have the brilliance and expertise to solve a lot of our own problems. We just have to free up people do that."

Assets of the Small School Model. Not only are the staff enjoying the new system, but the students are reporting the benefits as well. Danielle, a student in IHS, feels that small schools allow better communication among teachers. "You can talk to whatever teachers you're most comfortable with, and they will talk to the others for you," she said. "Everybody knows how you are doing." Danielle indicated that she feels small schools work better than larger schools because "you can implement things that students like to do, and then they are more likely to succeed in other areas." "We are getting students to be part of the conversion," said Tia Halliday.

"This connectivity happened before," said Laurie, "but now we are accessing more of our gap kids [those students who traditionally have been underserved by the educational system]. They are the kids who didn't always connect with those who were there for them. Also, this allows the small school principals to connect better with parents, which gives parents the reassurance that they know who to go to when there are problems. Everyone feels more safe and trusting."

Clair agrees and especially relishes the new level of accountability within the new system. "The small schools have allowed me to have a much more coherent conversation about kids," she said. "We have a great staff that's really on the same page, so we're actually talking about instruction. [This system] forces us to reflect in ways we didn't before. We used to meet by department rather than viewing the curriculum as a whole. It's much easier to communicate and hold staff meetings with 15 teachers instead of 85."

The new structure has allowed NEHS staff to try some innovative teaching styles, like team teaching. In IDEAS, for example, Clair is one half of the team that teaches "Science and Society," a class that blends science and social studies in an attempt to raise awareness of the real life overlap and the pertinence of the subject matter in the students' lives. Through globally-focused instruction in NIHS and arts-integration for the Academy of Arts, all students benefit from the use of promising practices for improving teaching and learning.

These block classes also allow students to stay with the same core group of about 20 students, which fosters a sense of community and helps to develop one-on-one relationships between teachers and students. The 9th and 10th grade blended classes in the Academy of Arts will loop next year, providing an extra amount of nurturing as students spend two years with the same teachers.

"In small schools you know pretty much everyone because you have the same people in several classes," said Danielle from NIHS. She went on to say that her history teacher opens the classroom for students to eat lunch in the room. "I feel very comfortable talking with my teachers. The classes are always open." Another student agreed. "We enjoy our teachers," said Kell, a junior and Vice President of the IDEAS school. "Like Mr. W. and Mr. S, our block teachers ... we really enjoy being taught by them."

Not only do students feel comfortable talking to teachers, they also feel cared for by their small school principal. Tiffany said her principal in the Academy of Arts was working very hard to keep her in school. “He says he cares about my education and wants me to succeed. He’s been trying and trying to help me. I think he cares more than my Dad cares. Wow, someone is actually trying to help me!”



Perhaps students speak so highly of their teachers because of how much time and personal interest the teachers devote to these students. For example, in NEMCO (North Eugene Manufacturing Company), students learn the business side of woodworking. Rather than working on their own projects, students build things to fill orders. At the end of the year, the metal and woodshop teachers have a conference with the company owners and community members, and they recommend people to be hired or sponsored based on skills they have demonstrated. Kell claims that the point is not to learn woodworking, per se. “It’s about learning how to work in a job, any particular job.”

In addition to the manufacturing company, the school has also held onto other Career Technical Education programs, including their catering company and day care. “The kids get passionate about these things,” said Clair, “and they get to have some control.” Laurie added, “We’re experiencing more ownership of the school, more personalization. Hopefully [we’re] changing the climate so that the kids realize this school belongs to them and their parents and their community.”

But allowing the student to feel connected is only part of the equation for success. Upping the rigor of the curriculum required additional training and support for the teachers in order to empower them to teach students more effectively. Some of that change in pedagogy involved structured professional development programs. Twenty-five teachers were also trained on site in SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Operation Protocol). Laurie feels that “if it’s good for our ELL students, it’s good for all of us.”

IDEAS also started an innovation that is working out well. Their support-based Saturday school started as a requirement for students who were behind, but once they got a taste of success, they starting *asking* if they could attend.

The Connections hour at the International school also appeals to many students, like Danielle. Each week during this time, a variety of activities take place. As freshman and sophomores, students select an activity that rotates in three-week cycles. These include joining an archery club or learning how to recycle a T-shirt. As juniors and seniors, the focus is on doing research on college and completing applications for college and financial aide. The activities in Connections are designed to fulfill the Oregon diploma requirements, specifically the Career Related Learning Standards (CRLS). All three small schools are actively working to implement the new Oregon Graduation requirements.

The staff and administration have worked together on several other changes as well, like removing tracking and implementing advisories. The change in the leadership structure, with the dissolving of department chairs, has allowed Laurie to feel like she has more access to the staff. “The staff has worked really hard,” said Henry. “It’s thrilling to see people stepping up to the plate.”

Pride in their schools. On the NEHS campus, student pride in their small schools is splashed all over the walls in a colorful display of murals and banners. “What we are trying to do,” explained Laurie, “is to personalize our environment so that kids feel a sense of ownership because



the architecture is not suited to having three distinct small schools. Each school is doing some neat things to capture student voice on the walls. For example, in IDEAS, our fabric class made the banners to show what IDEAS stands for. They also have a mural. In IHS, the students personalized the lockers with international flags. We find that when they do that kind of thing, they are much more respectful to the lockers. Graffiti has almost disappeared here. In the Academy of Arts they have a mural, but also a community member built beautiful display cases.”

Team approach to teaching and learning. Tia Halliday is among many who feel that the higher degree of integration and collaboration play a huge role in the success of the new system. “We’re seeing some wonderful things emerge...” she said. “Students are being engaged and feeling like what they’re doing has meaning beyond just getting through high school.”

Rigor with Support.

Because of their high academic standards, the staff and administration go out of their way to equip students to rise to the challenge. Rigor is not compromised when creating and implementing ways to meet content standards and graduation requirements, but students are well supported in order to reach these new heights.

Read Right. Starting five years ago, Laurie had the opportunity to participate in a reading task team for three years. During that time, the team worked with someone from the University of Oregon who helped them develop their own reading screeners and to norm them. Now all incoming 9th graders are tested to assess their reading level. If they are below their grade level, they are put into Read Right. “It’s a tough program,” Bob claimed, “but it works by reprogramming kids’ expectations. They start rereading simple books and their confidence grows as their ability expands. Students who go through this jump up to six grade levels in their reading ability (to exit the program at the 9th grade level, where they should be), and the benefits spill over into regular classes by enabling them to read, understand directions, and read aloud.

The Read Right program operates during five periods with 18-20 students per class. Three adults—two teachers and one trained instructional assistant—operate the program. One of the teachers is the district trainer and has been instrumental in expanding the program to other area schools. Student success stories are evident as readers graduate out of this program ready to be more independent learners.

Math Acceleration Center. The year before Laurie became principal, the school made the determination to stop tracking in math so all students were placed in nothing lower than Algebra. They did away with tracking or remedial classes. “The student stays with the enrichment of a regular class, because remedial classes start the kids off with the idea that that they can’t do it so why should they bother?” Laurie explained. “I have a lot of experience with different kinds of

inclusion, and kids always perform better (this way) than if they were pulled out and taught in a special class.”

At first, certain teachers started giving up part of their prep time to help students who were struggling. But it quickly became apparent that for these students to stay in a mainstream, non-tracked class they needed the support of pre-teaching and re-teaching. So NEHS staff developed the Math Acceleration Center, which really started gaining traction this year.

“Our decision to move toward college readiness for kids is what has motivated a lot of our changes,” said Bob Cunningham. Students who were struggling in math were automatically signed up for this supplemental math period in a classroom set up with partitions for tutorials and computers. There is an area for studying, an area for working with the computer-based program (called *Bridges to Algebra*), and an area where the teacher can work directly with the students. If guest teachers have a free period, they work in there, too. Also, university practicum students and individuals getting community service time provide assistance.

Students at any level can join and some drop in for periodic help. At times the more advanced students even end up doing impromptu tutoring for the lower level students while they are waiting. “It’s not about remediation, but about acceleration,” Laurie claims.

Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). One of the few schools west of the Mississippi with this program, NEHS’s program of multicultural education is designed to give students of color a voice and to encourage leadership among them. Dominant culture student leaders work together with MSAN students of color who are leaders as well. Students are helped to form allies across differences and understand how historical inequities have a continual influence on students and schools. Both dominant culture students and staff need to learn more about the experiences of students of color. “MSAN kids do problem solving and work as my advisors,” said Laurie. These dynamic kids “help us to help them, to let us know what we don’t know.”

Recently the school hosted a Breakout Night, entirely in Spanish, with the Latino families from the community. “It gave them a chance to tell us what they, as families and a community, need from us,” said Laurie. “We have a history of not having served this population well, despite our best efforts, and this gave us some great ideas to work on.”

Full Inclusion. While the school does have an ESD program that meets the needs of more severely disabled students in a separate setting, the small schools on the NEHS campus otherwise practices full inclusion for its students with learning disabilities. Because some of the classes are on the accelerated block, they only meet for 18 weeks. A student who needs more time to learn a subject, however, can take it for the full year. They also have the option of using elective credits to take an Elements class in preparation for the regular class. (Those who cannot pass a regular math class earn a modified diploma, but with the addition of more support structures, fewer students with disabilities have to work toward a modified diploma. Teachers are working hard to help all students meet the more stringent Oregon diploma requirements that are being phased in.)

Bob, one of four special education teachers at North Eugene, works exclusively out of NIHS. He claimed that his role has changed in the last few years. Whereas he used to teach core classes to 9th graders four periods a day,



the students are now included within the regular classes. Bob assists in certain classrooms, helping anyone who needs it. “I go where there is the highest need, highest number of IEP kids in a classroom,” he said. “For example, fall semester I was in the two literature classes and then in the math support center.” He also teaches a Personal Growth class, which helps equip students with life skills such as anger management.

Oregon Diploma Requirements

Making the change from a traditional comprehensive high school to the small schools model gave the staff an opportunity to redesign other structures. “We’re ahead of the curve as far as the new graduation requirements,” said Laurie Henry. “We’ve redesigned our curriculum around the Oregon standards, have gone back to a zero budget and said, “What’s it going to take, because we want to graduate kids who are college ready.”

Tia Halliday said, “The new graduation requirements dovetail well with what we are doing in the Academy of the Arts because we are looking at grades 11-12 and are hoping to have more student-driven experiences. A lot of the Career Related Learning Standards (CRLS) and Extended Application components fit right in with our philosophy about that. So we’re hoping to give students a real strong foundation in collaboration and self-management, skills they need in order to do some independent and self-directed work.” The CRLSs are incorporated into a variety of venues. Some of them are integrated into *Advisories* and others into individual classes.

While NEHS was in their redesign, they weren’t as focused on the CRLS, but Laurie Henry acknowledges their importance when she says they bring “real life relevancy to [the student’s] education. The district believes very strongly that the best way for kids to learn and be successful is by doing junior and senior capstone projects which take essential skills “wrapped up in project-based learning. It’s not just them going out and doing it, and then bringing it in for us to check off. It’s a much more collaborative effort.” Ms. Henry said if teachers disagree or prefer to teach in a more old-school style, then this is not the school for them.” Teachers in all three of the small schools are working hard to improve teaching and learning. The teachers model life-long learning and a strong commitment to a continuous improvement cycle.

Some teachers at NEHS were still passionate about the Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM) and had done good work around them that is still useful and adaptable to current requirements. As a result, they are taking the lead in the new junior and senior classes to start next year. The Junior Seminar (to meet every day) and Senior Project will provide opportunities for students to meet requirements for the Extended Application. These experiences will help students prepare for their future after high school.

Benefits to NEHS when high school is “working”

Being part of a school in transition is never easy. For many at NEHS, the extra effort and energy that has been required of them throughout this process has been well worth it. “I was four years away from retirement when this change happened,” said Bob Cunningham. “I had to decide if I wanted to just slide for four years, or if I wanted to get with the program. I’m very glad I decided to come along. It’s been very positive for both me and the kids.”

Sometimes “success breeds success.” As a result of North Eugene High School’s record of noteworthy changes, they recently received E3:OSSI funding for another two years. Each of the small schools had to apply independently and was evaluated based on their separate strengths. As a result, all three small schools on the NEHS campus will continue to have the opportunity to impact adolescents in a positive way during their high school experience and share what they have learned with others who desire to transform high schools to better meet the needs of all students.

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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 March 4, 2008 eight people were interviewed with the overarching question, “What works for kids at North Eugene High School?” Participants included the principal, teacher and small schools coordinator, three teachers, and three 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 North Eugene High School was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.