

# *Spotlight on Success: Powers High School*

*“We’re like family here.”<sup>1</sup>*

Powers High School, the smallest school described in *Spotlight on Success*, is located in rural Powers, Oregon in the southwest part of the state, inland from the southern Oregon coast approximately 40 miles by winding road. The town of Powers is small (approximately 650 residents) and was established as a result of a logging operation, which is still in existence today. It is located in a beautiful isolated river canyon and surrounded by mountains. Outdoor opportunities in and around Powers include fishing, hunting, and other outdoor recreational activities. Powers was once an active logging area; there is still a small saw mill in town. The economy has suffered since then and 50% of the students are on free and reduced lunches. The median income is low.

There are approximately 170 students in the Powers School District #31, one elementary (K-6) and one high school (7-12)<sup>2</sup> with 60 students. All middle school and high school classrooms share the same hallway, but for the most part they are seen as separate entities. A couple of small buildings house the wrestling room and a greenhouse area for working with plants and trees.

Jody Cyr is the principal of Powers Middle and High School. He is involved with his students and said one of his most important roles is to “build a level of trust with each kid.” Mr. Cyr taught for four years before he became a principal in another small Oregon high school. The principal, superintendent, secretary, and several teachers grew up in the area and went to Powers schools themselves. One teacher who grew up elsewhere said, “I love it that [they] grew up here. They care about the community. Now the school and community are working together. It works. It’s very cool.”



## *What’s working? Key Components to Success*

### *A “family” atmosphere*

The overall theme mentioned by both students and adults (staff, faculty, and administration) at Powers High School was the fact that the school was small, caring, and had a “family atmosphere.” Mr. Pedrick said, “We’re like a family.” “We feed ‘em, we love ‘em, we educate ‘em,” added Peggy Stallard, special education assistant. The family-like feeling of the school is evident in varying ways. As one teacher said, “Kids are not able to fall through the cracks here.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kayne Pedrick, Teacher

<sup>2</sup> Powers School District website: <http://www.powers.k12.or.us>

*Small.* Administrators, teachers, staff, and students all believed that the reason for their school's success was because it was small. Students clearly believed it was an advantage to be in a small school. Liz said, "I feel safe. In my big school I sometimes felt scared. But not here." She also said that in a big school she never had to talk to anyone, and here she wants to talk to people. And opposite of what one might think, students believed an advantage they had at PHS was a large number of opportunities for involvement.

Teachers also indicated that "small" was what worked best for them. Mr. King said he enjoyed PHS because of how much he got to know the kids. He said that at staff meetings they can talk about individual kids and learn from each other what different students need. Mr. Pedrick said, "Class sizes really allow teachers the chance to not only teach, but to also interact with the students and get to know them. Kids really feel like they are known and cared for." He also said he didn't have nearly as many discipline issues at Powers as his previous school just because "I know the kids and they know me." Another teacher said, "There are a lot of good kids here, people you'd want as neighbors." Not only do the teachers enjoy the students, but they feel a professional camaraderie with their colleagues too. One teacher said, "I can go talk to the superintendent or anybody at any time about anything. It's like talking to friends."

The teachers at PHS have challenges that some teachers do not have in a big school. They teach a lot of different subjects and wear a lot of different hats. Instead of getting substitutes for absent teachers, they cover for each other; Mr. Cyr also substitutes for teachers in their classes. While there is much work to do, the staff works together to do what is necessary for students to learn and stay in school. Ms. Stallard, an educational assistant, put it this way, "It all goes back to the teachers, custodians, aides, everybody in this whole little school working together. If that wasn't the case, it wouldn't work."

Mr. McNeil didn't believe teachers cared less at bigger high schools, but he said that smallness was the key to the school's success because adults could show that they cared. He said, "I cared about my kids at my old school. But I just couldn't follow up with them in the same way. I think teachers in bigger schools care just as much, but they don't have the opportunity to show that they care. Here we do."

One of the interesting things about this small school was the influence of each and every staff member. Ellen, the administrative assistant, had been at PHS for 29 years. She grew up in the area, moved away, and came back. Her history with the school was invaluable. Each of the students was like her child or grandchild. Last year in the middle of the winter, students seemed to be in the "doldrums," she said. So she came up with little rewards (milkshake, no homework pass, popcorn, etc.). She told how she introduced an incentive system in an assembly where all students had to do was avoid getting an F. The result was that every student except for three bought into the idea and brought their grades up.



Ellen realizes that it is very unique for a secretary to stand up in front of and address a student body. She said, "That's what's unique about our school. We don't really have those lines. Matt and Jody are my bosses, but it's really not like that. We're a team."

*Culture of care.* While students did not articulate that they felt “cared” for, they used other words that could be interpreted as such. Liz mentioned that there was no labeling of preppies or jocks. She said that hair style and clothing didn’t matter. “Everyone is in,” she said. Cody said “In my old schools, you’d get lost.” And Chris said, “When I first came here, I saw one hallway and thought ‘Are you serious?’ But it’s awesome because everyone knows everyone else. It’s like one big group of friends instead of cliques where you feel disliked.” These students appreciated the role their teachers played in their lives. “A teacher is just a teacher at other schools, but here a teacher talks to you,” said Chris. Liz said, “A teacher is your friend.”

Teachers took actions unrelated to school that also showed they cared. Chris said he was once sick for several days and one of his teachers came to his house and brought his homework. Mr. McNeil indicated that they have had a lot of kids living in some really tough situations, such as drugs in the home, parents in jail, etc. He said, “Powers provides them with stability. Sometimes teachers even take them into their own homes, just so that they have a home, at all! We had a senior move in with us mid-year because he had no other options, and he stayed with us until he graduated. That’s just how this community is.”

In addition to teachers and staff caring about students’ physical needs, they often influenced their students to stay in school. Many students are at risk of dropping out and they try to figure out ways to relate to each student. Ellen said she often has conversations with students who are getting discouraged. She tries to help them see that it’s not so much about getting the diploma as it is about sticking it out and completing something they started. She tells students this is their current job. She told a story about a student who was a volunteer firefighter, but wanted to quit school. She asked him, “Would you leave a fire before it was out? No. Well, then don’t leave this job before you’ve finished what needs to be done either.” She wants students to see that school is a journey and they shouldn’t lose sight of the day to day experience. “Sure it’s great to be on the college track, but it’s important to be *here* today.”

Cody shared from his personal experience of almost dropping out of school. He said, “They’re helping me recover my credits. They said I wouldn’t graduate with my class. I almost said screw it. I’ll just drop out and go log. But then Mr. Cyr helped me realize that wasn’t a good thing to do. He helped me see that years down the road I wouldn’t have anything. It’s better to graduate and then you can advance. Otherwise, I’d have the same position as the cart guy at Wall-Mart for 20 years.”



Students at Powers High School not only cared about their own school, but they also showed compassion for others outside their school. “When one hurts, the other one hurts,” someone said. A powerful example took place in the fall of 2007 when a boy at their rival school was diagnosed with bone cancer and the students found out the family didn’t have insurance. They started by taking a big card around for everyone to sign, and when the student helper came back to the office, she had a shirt full of money students had donated, even though a lot of the students were economically deprived. The student body had an assembly where students brainstormed ideas of how to raise money for the boy. Fundraisers included donating money from one gate at the first home basketball game, a raffle, spaghetti feed, change drive, and more. The numerous fundraisers raised over \$3,000 to donate to the student with cancer. Other schools in the league were

motivated by Powers' example and donated as well. The folks at Powers were very proud of what their little community had done for someone else.

### *Connections with the community*

Teachers and students indicated that the schools were a vital part of the community of Powers. One teacher said the school was even the "cornerstone to the city." He said a few years ago they won a national championship, and at the time a burglar could have walked through town and taken anything because everyone was at the game. Even students felt valued in unusual ways by the community. Cody said, "We're important to the community. I feel respected. They see students as future leaders rather than 'that punk kid.'"

One of the important ways the community supports the school is through the funding of scholarships for post-secondary education. In the 2006-2007 school year alone, The Powers Community Scholarship Fund contributed about \$58,000 to students; the total amount in the fund is more than triple that amount. Donations build year after year. Managers of the fund don't stipulate or care where students go to school or what kind of school they attend as long as they are furthering their education. Students have used money to go to flag school, meat cutting school, diesel mechanic training, a 2-year college, a 4-year college, and even graduate school. Every student that applies gets an award.

Two members of the community make an important contribution to the education of PHS students who need advanced courses when otherwise these courses might not be offered at a small school. The owner of the lumber mill in town has a doctoral degree in civil engineering; in addition to running his mill, he volunteers at the high school by teaching physics every morning during first period. His nephew who also works at the mill and has a degree in forestry co-teaches the forestry class one period a day. The men teach under the supervision of a licensed teacher, who also benefits from the knowledge and application of the content. Their work affirms that PHS is doing valuable work with their future work force and members of the community.

As a result of the support they feel, the school does a lot to keep the community and the school tied together. For example, last year several senior projects became community service projects. Seniors replaced a sidewalk in front of the elementary school, cleaned up the cemetery, and repaired an old awning in front of the local market. As Ellen put it, "It really does take a village."

### *Relevant and effective programs*

*Native Species (NS)*. One very important way for students to be involved is the Native Species program that is based on grants and is aimed at students who have a hard time in a school setting and typically don't play sports. After school, PHS students either practice for sports or they work in the NS program; both have the same behavior and academic standards. Peggy, educational assistant and program coordinator for NS, said it hits the kids who are "just out there floating because now they have a reason to be in school. When they sit in class and it's boring, they know they have a reward at the end of the day." Students in this program first volunteer for 15 hours and then apply and are interviewed for the job. They are paid \$8.00 an hour to work collecting seeds and cuttings, growing native plants and trees, and working in the forest. Sometimes they work

with a botanist from the National Forest Service on tree propagation. Once they went to Bandon to a noxious weed class. Work takes place for two hours a day four days a week, and eight hours on in-service and grading days.



Chris was a student who has benefited from the NS program. Through this school to work program, all of his college tuition may be paid. The program has helped him academically as well. Chris said, “Money is money—people work for money. If you don’t come to school, you can’t work. If you don’t work or your grades are bad or you’re in trouble at school, you don’t get paid. If I don’t want to go to school one day, I think of this and I go. School is [a lot more fun] because of it. It’s made a difference for me. I probably would have dropped out.”

Cody said PHS and the NS program was making a difference for him. He did not do well in a bigger school, had a GPA of .89, and was later kicked out. He came to PHS for a second chance. Once he got involved in the NS program, he said he changed; his GPA in January 2008 was around 3.28. The shop teacher said he had completely turned around his behavior and attitude toward school. Cody said he gets respect at PHS and what he learns in the NS program can be applied to his biology and math classes.

*Junior Career Exploration (JCE).* Every junior at Powers High School is required to take the JCE class, which meets requirements for the senior project and the career related learning standards. Mr. Pedrick teaches the class and Mr. Cyr finds a job shadow experience for at least 16 hours. While addressing the standards is an ongoing activity in all four years of high school, the JCE course provides an opportunity for students and their teacher to focus on fulfilling and documenting the requirements. For the primary project, each student selects a career to pursue or explore.

Throughout the JCE course, students also document the Extended Application of the standards. After this, students journal, complete reflection questions, and make a power-point presentation to the class about what they learned. These discoveries during their junior year influence some of their courses and activities for their senior year.

Prior to the junior year when students take JCE, Powers’ students create an Education Plan and Profile. CIS is used to familiarize students with a variety of career opportunities. Twice a year students update their plan. In addition, the school has additional forms inserted into each student’s folder to track what they have accomplished during the year.

*Multiple pathways to credit or courses.* Students at Powers have numerous ways to gain credits, based on their needs and interests. School personnel are aware that because they are small, they need to be creative in giving students a variety of opportunities to complete graduation requirements. Some of these options assist students with credit recovery, or are designed for those who need to fit their school schedule around their work schedule. One of these is the North Dakota Studies online series. Students can take classes that are not available at Powers. The school pays the \$300.00 fee. If a student does not successfully complete the course, the student needs to reimburse the school.

One of the teachers who has taught at Powers for 15 years has been instrumental in bringing several options to PHS. “Mr. McNeil,” said one of his colleagues, “is the hardest working teacher you’ll ever meet.” He teaches all levels of math, Spanish, keyboarding, and more. He comes early and stays late every evening to tutor and to help students catch up. He currently works with Microsoft Net Meeting, which allows absent students to see what he’s writing on a whiteboard. In addition, he uses iVision, which allows students to hear his voice. He is also working with Google on software needed to teach live on the internet. Mr. McNeil is asking Google to equip schools to reach kids who can’t be reached by traditional methods; the plan would also allow schools to bring in more classes than they can currently afford.



Other ways Powers assists students in taking courses that count toward their diploma and provide a meaningful experience include a building trades class, other shop classes, and a home economics class. The shop teacher requires his students to do some expository writing as one of the course requirements. Those who want to take a higher level English class may take a class with an instructor from Southwestern Oregon Community College who comes to Powers High School once a week. Another option is to take online college courses through Southwestern. Yet another option is available for students to take a college level physics class after school with a teacher from the elementary school that is licensed to teach high school physics. Whenever students want one of these options, staff is able to adjust the schedule to accommodate these students.

### *Benefits to PHS when a high school is “working”*

One teacher said that in his previous school, he wasn’t enjoying his job anymore, and he was doing everything he needed to do out of routine. He said, “I enjoyed working with the kids, but there were other things that were just rubbing me the wrong way, so I started looking on EdZapp for another position. [I got this job] and I love it here. It’s like having my cake and eating it too!”

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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 January 24-25, 2008 12 people were interviewed with the overarching question, “What works for kids at Powers High School?” Participants included the principal, three teachers, three students, a special education assistant, and an administrative assistant. 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 PHS was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.*