

Spotlight on Success: Scappoose High School

*"If you make your decisions based on what's going to be best for the kids, then you're always going to make the right decision."*¹

Scappoose High School (SHS) is located in Scappoose, Oregon, a small town of about 6,000 people. It is located approximately 20 miles north of Portland and a few miles from the Columbia River. Faculty and staff serve a student body of 730 students in grades 9-12. The school district has four elementary schools and one middle school that feed into SHS. Principal Sue Hays has been in the leadership role at SHS for four years after serving as Assistant Principal for one year.

What's working? Key Components to Success

Servant Leadership / Instructional Leadership

Sue Hays came from a family involved in education. She spent 21 years in another Oregon school district, during which time she was on the planning team for a new high school. After three years as vice principal at another high school, she came to Scappoose because she believed her style and vision fit with the community and school, and the potential changes that could take place. Sue had always worked in big schools and enjoyed it, but she said "I now feel like I've died and gone to heaven. This is where I belong."



Sue's comments regarding her work portrayed that of a servant leader. "I'm a service administrator," she said. When she spoke of working with her teachers, she said "If I take care of you, you'll take care of my kids. I want to know 'What can I do for you today?' It's really important to ... make sure they have what they need." The constant stream of teachers in her office after school was evidence that she was approachable and available to meet their needs and consequently, those of their students.

Karl Atkins, a social studies teacher, was one who attributed much of the school's current success to Sue. "She's the agent of change in this school. Without leadership and a vision and putting together a team, you're really running against an uphill battle. She has clear goals and helps us think strategically. Leadership has been the key. It's easy to jump on board a moving train, but hard to create that initial momentum."

Emily Anderson, mathematics teacher, said Sue Hays sets a high standard. "She encourages us to go out and make ourselves better teachers. She ... obviously has this vision, and she is so good

¹ Sue Hays, Principal

about sharing that and getting people to buy into it and wanting to be ahead of the ballgame. And so she hires people and she asks people here to do the same thing.”

Students also praised their principal. In Scarlett’s words, “she has built the school to be something really good. I myself have made a lot of progress and she has helped me dramatically through the changes I have gone through in high school. She has helped me be a better person, and better in classes too.” Scarlett said because of circumstances in her life, she came to SHS as a freshman with “an attitude problem. So Ms. Hayes and I didn’t get along too well. I was an angry person but realized that she was here to help me. When my Dad had cancer, I talked to her about it. She said, “It’s hard, but we are here for you. You stay strong at home, and when you come here you can let it go.” Scarlett said she and one of her friends in particular felt free to go to Ms. Hayes whenever they had a problem. “Her door is always open and you know she is there for you.”

Teachers attributed the reputation of the school to the positive changes taking place. In fact, at one time Mr. Atkins said they weren’t seen as even having anything to offer student teachers. But about three years ago that started changing. Now SHS turns down applicants for student teachers who want to be at SHS. “Our reputation is out there,” said Mr. Atkins. “People want to come here.”

Sue Hays gives the credit for her school’s success right back to the teachers and staff. When the question was asked, “What works here?” most all participants, both students and teachers, included Sue in their answer. When she heard that, she said, “But it’s not about me. *They* inspire *me*! I [just] love what I do.” When asked what keeps her going, Sue replied, “I want to be the difference. I want to make things happen. I want people to believe that they can do the same thing. This is my passion. I’m 50, and I still feel untapped.”

What’s Best for Kids

“What’s best for kids” was verbalized repeatedly during interviews with all adults at Scappoose High School. “If you make your decisions based on what’s going to be best for the kids, then you’re always going to make the right decision,” said Sue Hays. Karl Atkins said it a different way, “This is not an easy or an ideal school, but I know there’s nobody in this school who isn’t doing their absolute best for the students. 95 % of the staff has chosen to be here, but the demand is great. Everybody is expected to bring something new.”

Sometimes what’s best for kids is not necessarily in the curriculum, and therefore not in the budget. For example, some students have experienced the International Speakers Series in Portland, travel opportunities through Social Studies classes, Focus the Nation Seminar at Portland State University, or a trip to Body Works at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. One teacher was identified as involving students in the community and into the political and civic process. Another was doing “phenomenal innovative stuff.” And Mr. Atkins said that was typical for every department. “The bar’s pretty high,” he said, “and it’s always rising. It would be easier if we just settled in, but ...”

An observer could assume there were unlimited funds at SHS. But instead, there was a “can do” attitude. Mr. Atkins said, “Teachers just do things. Sue is very supportive. She finds a way, and probably she pays for some of it out of her own pocket. I know I do. I expect other teachers do.

She has never told us no. If we want to do something, she finds a way to make it happen.” This comment was consistent with Sue’s comment about finding money when it was “best for kids.” Sue said, “If someone wants it bad enough to come in the office and ask for it, it’s important. I’ve got money sitting in different accounts. If you need something for kids, then we’ll make it happen. I guess there is a bottom someplace, but [much of this] is so minimal, yet it has a high return. Like Karl Atkins wants to take his kids to hear some speakers down at Portland State. What? A few dollars for a bus? I’ll take it out of our Coke machine, if I have to!”

Scappoose High School recognizes that it’s best for kids if a school has updated technology for the classroom. To make it a priority, they were moving dollars away from textbooks and into technology-based resources because “it’s more relevant to students.” Money was donated for Smart Boards, so half of the rooms had them. In addition, donations were coming in to update the computers.

While this story is more about school-wide practices, several teachers and students praised the work of teachers in the classroom for contributing to “what’s best for kids.” Robert Medley, health/PE teacher and coach, said that much of the reason school was working for students at SHS was a result of how well teachers created learning experiences in the classroom. Mr. Medley credits the administration and younger, more energetic teachers for bringing new ideas and technology to the classroom, thus invigorating the whole staff.

Mr. Sprenger was a more recent addition to the teaching staff. Of his own teaching of mathematics, he said, “I don’t teach the way I was taught--I just memorized. I didn’t really understand math until I started teaching it. I do a lot of that with the kids. They teach each other. It makes my job harder because I’m constantly changing, constantly trying to think of how I can make it better. I didn’t get in this job to settle for being a mediocre math teacher. Mediocre math teachers produce mediocre math students. If you want them to be exceptional, you have to be exceptional. Change is good, but change is work.”

Mr. Atkins added to the list of what was best for kids by saying if he had to pick one thing that has impacted students more than anything, it would be “the relationship piece.” He contrasted today’s climate with one from the past when he said, “Today we create opportunities for students to have meaningful relationships with teachers. When I arrived, it was common to have students crumpled in the hallway, crying, and to have adults just pass them. That’s unacceptable. It doesn’t happen anymore.”

Programs and/or projects.

Bridges. As is true for all schools, Scappoose initiates programs and projects they believe will help their students be academically and socially successful. During the fall of 2007, they examined data and learned that about 80 students would never graduate, even if they took all the required subjects. So Sue Hays went to the school board and told them SHS needed to start their own alternative program, which they approved. In one month’s time, they hired a teacher and gathered up about 25 students, several of whom had dropped out in previous years. The students in the *Bridges* program take a half day with their cohort of students in the SHS building; the other half day



they either join students who are in regular classes or go to a place of employment. The intention is that as students finish their requirements, others will be brought in to replace them.

Scarlett was a student who had experienced more than her share of death for her young age. Her sister died when she was in middle school, and her father had recently died of cancer. Because she was struggling academically, she was looking forward to starting the *Bridges* program. She believed it would help her with the classes she hadn't yet passed, and with the difficult ones she still had to take. "I think it's going to motivate me and help me graduate."

Team approach to teaching math. Because one of the new graduation requirements for 2012 is that students need to be proficient in Algebra 1, two math teachers took on the challenge of creating a new curriculum for students who needed competence in pre-algebra and who had never had success in mathematics. Susie Erickson (endorsed in advanced math) and Emily



Anderson (endorsed to teach middle school math) taught 50-60 students who were at a very low level of math for all three trimesters, trying to help them meet the standards by the end of the year so they could move into Algebra I the following year. Ms. Anderson and Ms. Erickson taught students in a variety of settings—sometimes altogether in the cafeteria, and sometimes split up into two rooms, including the computer lab. As Emily said, "For some kids it's just a matter of something that causes math to click in their head—they see something really differently and all of a sudden they say, 'Oh, I can do this.'"

In order to team teach, it was necessary for both Emily and Susie to give up the typical independence of high school teachers. With their different personalities and their skills at different levels, Emily credits Susie with coming up with many of their ideas, but she says, "The team teaching is probably the best thing I've ever done. I just love it. I wish I could team teach all of my classes."

As with anything new, there is the risk of failure. As Susie said, "We were very scared, but [Sue] is so supportive that even if it had failed, she would have helped us pick ourselves up and move on." In the words of Sue Hays, "These two outstanding teachers put together a math program over the summer and basically wrote their own textbook. What these two teachers have done with these kids is unbelievable."

Reading program. During the same school year, data also showed that about 40% of the incoming 9th graders were not at grade level, so SHS added a reading project "smack in the middle of the year." A reading specialist works to improve reading and writing scores because SHS data show that when these scores go up, other grades increase as well. One teacher said, "We've seen huge, huge increases in our reading scores" as a result of this effort.

Proficiency-based credits. Eight teachers in the building are using standards-based assessment, based on student proficiency. SHS teachers are pleased at the response and success of this approach to helping students meet graduation requirements. Students in the team-taught pre-algebra class have particularly responded to standards-based teaching. As Ms. Erickson said, "Both kids and parents love this system because there is no guess work." Students are allowed to keep working until they have successfully completed a standard.

Advisory groups. Scappoose High School instituted Advisory groups that met weekly for 25 minutes. A group of about 20 students stay together with an adult for the four years of their high school experience. Advisories had a different function for freshman than they did for seniors, but for both they provided a time to develop relationships with a mentor, create an educational plan, explore careers of interest, work on Career Related Learning Standards, prepare for the senior presentation, apply for scholarships, and prepare for future college or vocational work. Scappoose was also in the process of making connections and building partnerships with the community to provide students with internship and mentorship experiences in their area of interest. Katie's perception was that advisories were all about "relating to your life outside of high school." Mr. Medley attributed the academic turn-around of a junior student he knew to the advisory program. He said "Her advisory teacher going to bat for her has made a big difference."

Diploma requirements. SHS was one of six sites that received a three-year Improvement and Implementation Grant from the Oregon Department of Education. For this grant, they implemented all the graduation requirements in ways that fit the school. During the required Senior Seminar, students plan and present senior projects to demonstrate skills needed to go out into the world. These projects meet the Oregon extended application and project-based assessment requirements, and also integrate Oregon's Career Related Learning Standards with the student's experience.

Megan indicated Senior Seminar was demanding, but the activities were important. While she admitted some students didn't love early career exploration, Katie said "I thought I wanted to be a physical therapist, but when I had to research it for Senior Seminar, I realized that's not something I could do. I'd rather find out now."

Students may also obtain college credit by participating in career and technical education and business courses sponsored by Portland Community College. They can also take English, calculus, and computer programming courses through Portland State University.

To keep students interested in classes, a wide range of courses were offered, including digital photography, forensics, film making, eight AP classes (including Calculus and Statistics), drivers' education, woods, metals, sports psychology, and careers in health occupations.

Community

Persons at Scappoose High School saw the community as an entity both within its walls and outside the building to the greater local area. They also understood that true community is both a give and take from each of these units. It is mutually beneficial to persons in each group.

Breaking Down the Walls. A program that had a "phenomenal" impact on Scappoose students during the 2007-2008 year was "Breaking Down the Walls."² A trained person facilitated a two-day workshop for half the student body and 15 teachers who volunteered to participate. The trainer worked with student leaders who had a chance to develop skills and build relationships in ways they never had before. The focus of the program was on breaking

² <http://library.thinkquest.org/CR0212302/index.html>

down barriers that inhibit people from telling their stories. Students learned that every person has a story to tell, and sometimes not a very happy one. They also learned the importance of understanding what makes each person unique. Emily Anderson, the teacher who organized it, said “If you know someone’s story, how can you treat them poorly?” Bryan, a student, said “No school is perfect, but we don’t have cliques here, probably because we did *Breaking Down the Walls* this year. It helped our school immensely.”

Fifteen seniors, including Bryan, were chosen to be student leaders for the “Walls” workshop. They picked social leaders as well as students who were quieter but who needed to feel related to something. The students attended a Saturday training session where they were shown ways to help a mixed group of students to bond, starting with “fun stuff” until small group members became friends. As the day moved on, students were invited to become more personal. Bryan said, “It really helped us understand why, for example, some jock who doesn’t like too many people, might be the way he is. A lot of people were crying. I wish every school could do this. They’d be better off by leaps and bounds.” One of Bryan’s teachers said of his experience, “You could tell at the end of two days that he was a different kid than when he walked in the first day.”



Katie was another student who immediately attributed some SHS success to *Breaking Down the Walls*. She said she still talks to people in the hall that were in her group that day to whom she never would have talked before this experience. She said, “It made me look beyond what someone is like on the outside and what makes them the way they are. It helped me really understand more what people are going through.”

Culture of Care. “The whole culture is pretty caring here,” said Sue Hays. One of the most impactful things that happened during the 2007-2008 year was the invitation Scappoose High School made to Vernonia High School after their school and town had been destroyed by an early December flood. For two months they shared their building, changed their schedule, and did everything they could to support a grieving community in a neighboring town. They donated food and clothing, and organized the whole community to support their efforts to help. The decision to share the building with Vernonia was made and approved very quickly by the students, SHS staff, and district. Sue Hays said, “This is a community of people who believe what’s right and come together to do it. You don’t have to wait around for bureaucracy.”

In addition to learning to care for students from another high school, students and teachers shared evidence of other circumstances within their own walls where care was shown. Ed Reese, a counselor, said that after the recent death of a student to a car accident on a dangerous and highly-traveled road, he and students were working with the girl’s parents to advocate for the road to be made safer.

One way teachers “cared” for their students was by learning each of their names and building a personal relationship with them. A precursor to building the advisory program was for each teacher to figure out which students they knew by name and those for whom they had a more personal relationship. This activity was an eye-opening experience for many teachers, who then made greater efforts to build a relationship with more students and get to know more of them by name. Karl Atkins said he and Robert Medley had a running challenge to see if they could name

each of the SHS students by name—all 725 of them. Mr. Atkins figured that between the two of them, they could identify 95% of the students.

Culture of Giving.

In some ways, Vernonia was the catalyst for SHS students to learn to give to others. According to Ms. Anderson, “it gave students an opportunity to give back and understand the importance of it. We had a lot of kids go out to Vernonia and see first hand what was going on. It was a great follow-up to *Breaking Down the Walls*.”

Community 101 and Natural Helpers. Students at SHS were learning to care for others by giving to them. PGE helped sponsor the Community 101 elective class that SHS has embraced. Natural Helpers is the biggest club in the school and is mainly student-led with some guidance from Mr. Reese. Students decide to whom they wish to give the money they raise. Together these two groups have raised money for non-profit organizations, participated in community service, held a canned food drive and clothes drive for Vernonia, helped at Doernbecker Children’s Hospital, among other gifts of time and money. Scarlett, a student, recognized that giving to others has had a positive impact on her. She said, “I love to help other people, kids especially. It was great to know I could do something, like I set up a dance for a fund raiser and that takes a lot of time, but I learned so much.” With all the fundraisers and activities available, Sue estimated that about 80% of the student body was involved in giving to others in some way.

There were other demonstrations of giving. The SHS art department donated hand-crafted ceramic bowls to the local Empty Bowls project. (Empty Bowls is a nation-wide fundraiser that helps supply area food banks around the world.) This year they sold 43 ceramic bowls; next year’s goal is 100 bowls. Students and staff also donated 46 pints of blood to the American Red Cross. There were 21 first time donors. The Skateboard Club also planned a skateboard clinic for children 6-9 years of age; high school students led small groups of students for 30 minute mini sessions at no cost.³

Student comments about giving to others were insightful. Katie said, “You get to look a lot at the outside world. There are a lot of needy people out there. It’s nice to help someone.” Katie believed that students were changed by the Vernonia experience because it made them more aware of others. “It made me thankful for the life I have,” she said. “It makes me realize I can’t just think about myself, that I have to think of other people out in the world.”



Culture of Cooperation, Collaboration, and Appreciation

Professional development. For staff, one of the most effective practices to create positive change was professional development. The common experiences also brought opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Several teachers gave credit to grants for helping SHS teachers gain new understandings and skills. Mark Sprenger said, “Without professional development, we wouldn’t be where we are today. It’s allowed us to go to a lot of workshops, to learn, and re-

³ Scappoose High School website: <http://www.scappoose.k12.or.us/?q=taxonomy/term/27>

learn.” Teachers experienced big inservice meetings that involved the whole staff, but in Mark’s words, “any time any teacher wanted to go to a workshop or a conference, we made it happen.”

It seemed each member of the staff felt they were an important part of the work at Scappoose, and this started with staff development. Mr. Sprenger said, “Any decision that has been made in the last three years has been supported by the entire staff. It’s not like we’re told, ‘This is what’s going to happen...’ The direction is from the top, but it’s collective information and collective work.” Staff meetings were often teacher-led. Ms. Hays planned an agenda, but “she puts teachers up front rather than doing it all herself.” According to her teachers, Sue asks them what things they need to accomplish in the next meeting. Many times she arranges for teacher to present a lesson and share examples with each other. Sue said, “I just take all my memories of how I wanted to be treated as a teacher.”

Every teacher was given a copy of *Breaking Ranks II*; together they studied every chapter of the book. Teachers have gone to conferences, sometimes to speak and share what they were doing at SHS for kids. Three teachers presented at a Superintendent’s Conference, and talked about the implementation of change, where they’ve come from and where they’re going, what was done to get teachers on board for the new graduation requirement and standards-based assessment, and integrating content areas. In addition, two teachers presented at the Oregon Career and Technical Education conference on team-teaching the pre-algebra class and using standards-based assessments.

It is difficult to highlight what’s working at SHS without identifying an attitude that was prevalent with each participant of this study. Simply put, everyone liked everybody. Students spoke highly of their principal and their teachers. Teachers attributed their satisfaction at SHS to their principal and their students. And the principal praised the work of her teachers and students. From the perspective of all three of these groups, there was a culture of cooperation and collaboration in the building, as is illustrated by the sections that follow:

Principal. Sue Hays’ objective was that every person in the building—students, faculty, and staff -- feel a part of the team at SHS. She believed they were making progress on that goal. Over and over she praised the work of each person who worked at SHS. She said, “The collective group climate here is awesome. What makes a school is everyone, not just the teachers.”

Teachers. Heidi Hayden expressed an opinion heard frequently at SHS. “The benefits [of teaching at Scappoose High School] are never ending,” she said. “I like going to work every day.” Emily Anderson spoke similar sentiments when she said, “We have an awesome staff, a really close staff, very willing to change, wanting to make a difference. A lot of people put in a lot of time here, willingly. We all love being here. We would pretty much do anything for anybody. It is a really nice place to work.”



Mr. Medley felt good about his work at Scappoose High School because “it’s making a difference in the lives of the students. The drop out rate is low. And the number of students going on to college is high.” Mark Sprenger talked about how his satisfaction with his job affected students in a positive way. He said, “We have an incredible staff. When the staff doesn’t get along, it’s easier

to take a bad day out on a student...Teachers have a higher energy level because they're happy to be at work. It rubs off on the kids."

Much of what was special for teachers was the privilege of working with SHS students. One teacher recognized that every school has their social groups, but she said the senior class "had been really great about not making it so dividing. Whether it is breaking down the walls or not, I don't know. It just makes it a fun place to be. It makes you want to work harder." Ms. Anderson added, "There are so many of those breakthrough moments with kids every day, whether it is a moment in the classroom or whether it is winning a state title. They remind you of why you teach."

Students. When speaking of her school, Scarlett said, "I think our school is great and I am glad I go here." When asked what made his school special, Bryan immediately credited the staff. "The staff has a strong hold on everybody. One of my teachers always makes you feel like you're number one, and that he's there for you. We have teachers like that. We're a family. We've grown a bond. It's remarkable how strong it is. And I'd give 85% of that to the staff." Bryan also said the staff talk to students as if they were adults and "you can tell they love working with you."

Scarlett shared similar sentiments to Bryan when she said, "I think the best thing about Scappoose is the staff that we have and how much they are willing to put forth to help our students and our school. The staff really wants us to graduate and they are going to do whatever they can to help us as kids. I think that that is just the best thing that we have at our school."



Megan House said. We don't have that 'I'm a teacher, you're a student' mentality here. We have easygoing, relaxed, and approachable teachers. It feels like a family." Megan added that when students seek extra help from teachers, they don't feel like they're going to be looked on as a disappointment because they are struggling."

Benefits to SHS when high school is "working"

Satisfaction, safety, and security in one's job allow people to dream. Mr. Sprenger said when he thinks about the future of SHS, he dreams of "having a system where we take care of all the core classes in the morning and then have an Action Elective block in the afternoon for an hour and a half. It would be thematic, cross-curricular, and across grade levels. It would move us more toward an extended application and get kids out into the community more. There's a place for a classroom, but I don't think the work world or universities work on that model anymore, and increasingly, neither do our students."

When a school works for the students who go there, it gives renewed energy to the staff and retirement doesn't seem so urgent. Mr. Medley said, "I want to do this until I retire – not so in the past." Another teacher conveyed the sentiment of two other teachers when she said, "One of our teachers who has been here for 20 years says he feels like a brand new teacher. And another teacher was going to retire after 30 years of teaching. Now she doesn't want to."

What is it like to teach in a school where school is working for many students? Ms. Anderson said, "It makes me want to be a better teacher. It makes me want to come to work. I love my

job.” Sue Hays summed up her perspective, as well as what she hopes for every person in her charge, when she said, “Liking your job and wanting to be here is huge. Every job has its days, but here it is pretty great 99% of the time.”

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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 4, 2008 13 people were interviewed with the overarching question, “What works for kids at Scappoose High School?” Participants included the principal, assistant principal, six teachers, one counselor, 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 Scappoose was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.