

Spotlight on Success: Sisters High School

"I think what makes a difference for our kids is that they graduate with a sense of place: high school, community, and environment."

Sisters High School (SHS) is located in the central Oregon town of Sisters, Oregon, which is situated at the edge of the Cascade Mountain range within easy driving distance to major mountains, rivers, the desert, and recreational areas. The town of Sisters is known for its western theme and weekend festivals. Sisters High School is a part of the Sisters School District #6, which includes an elementary, middle, high school, and high school alternative program. The high school serves about 515 students² with 35 teachers and 27 staff (administrators, counselors, secretaries, aides, and kitchen staff).

Bob Macauley has been the principal at SHS for five years. He started his teaching career at the elementary and middle levels in another Oregon school district, and then moved to Sisters High School as a humanities teacher in 1992. In 1998 he became the assistant principal. He was also head football coach for 16 years until retiring in the fall of 2007. He was named Oregon Football Coach of the Year four times during his tenure as coach.



Sisters High School is housed in a beautiful building that is only five years old. Each classroom empties out into a plaza shared by three other classrooms. The large open areas are equipped with computers and used to supplement teaching in the classrooms. Student art work was evident and displayed throughout the building, demonstrating one of its connection to the community, which is an appreciation for the arts. The school building has three wings, each with a different focus: Academic, Arts, and Athletic.



What's working? Key Components to Success

Integrated Courses, Programs, and Projects

Interdisciplinary Environmental Expedition (IET). One of the most unique features at Sisters High School is the Interdisciplinary Environmental Expedition (IEE) program, which just completed its seventh year and is supported from the general fund. Three teachers, each licensed in different content areas, team teach the IEE program which is available for students in their

¹ Bob Macauley, Principal

² Sisters High School website:

<http://www.sisters.k12.or.us/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=260>

junior year; about 60% of them take advantage of the opportunity. Samra Spear teaches English, Glen Herron teaches science, and Rand Runco teaches outdoor recreation. However, each of these subjects are integrated into the activities and learning experiences for students. For example, students read books like *Touching the Void* and *Into the Wild*. They hike up Middle Sister in the fall, participate in a three-day white-water raft and camping trip down the Deschutes River in the spring, and take numerous day trips around the town of Sisters with activities such as taking water samples and performing stream-bed restoration in Whychus Creek. The forty expeditions a year incorporate full integration of all content areas. IEE themes follow the natural geography of the Deschutes River Basin from the high mountains to the Columbia River.

IEE is really a “school within a school” at Sisters High School, and the logistics of teaching the unique learning experiences require a common planning period and a great deal of collaboration. The three IEE teachers talked about the satisfaction and the challenges of true integration. Mr. Runco said, “You can integrate almost every subject area. The content isn’t what’s crucial. It’s much more difficult to have personalities and people who can actually work together for a length of time, are committed to each other and to the students, and buy into a program that is so non-traditional.” Ms. Spear said the subject matter becomes a vehicle for learning rather than an end in itself.

Any student can take the IEE program, including those in special education, those at risk, and the “high fliers.” Samra said, “The class works for every kid, but in different ways. Success isn’t always defined the same way, so each student comes up with their own problems and solutions. The challenge for us as teachers is coming up with objectives and then asking ourselves, ‘How can a student show mastery of that?’ Teachers need to have an open mind. We need to assess differently.”

The IEE teachers continually work on developing partnerships with local groups, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and people in the community that can help them in a variety of ways. They work with local artists, volunteers, the US Forest Service, Healthy Waters Institute, and other professionals who enhance the education of IEE students.

While taking the class is a wonderful experience for juniors, seniors who have completed the program as juniors can apply to be interns during their senior year. These interns gain even greater skills as they teach juniors what they learned themselves, lead groups on the expeditions, facilitate swift water rescues and repels off of 150-foot cliffs, and work with the IEE teachers back at SHS. Joe was one of the interns who loved the IEE program. He said it gives students a chance to explore, a sense of place, socialization skills, skills to work through conflicts, a way to be involved and active, and engagement in the curriculum material. “IEE has really brought things into perspective. It’s helped me decide where I want to go to college and that I want a career in fishery and wildlife or forestry. This class has made me want to incorporate my love of the outdoors into the rest of my life.” Lani, another student intern, said it taught her communication and organizational skills, as well as more skills that have transferred to her other classes.



Joe spoke of the additional skills he learned in his IEE internship. He said, “IEE has changed me as a person. It’s changed how I interact with people on a day-to-day basis...for sure it has! It’s helped me with people skills and in learning how to lead successfully. It’s helped me learn how to earn the respect of people just a year younger than me, and how to learn the dynamics of a group.” Mr. Runco explained that the interns have more extreme responsibilities than most adults would be comfortable with. “They get leadership opportunities beyond what leadership is thought of. They’re in a teaching situation, educating for physical and cognitive skills.” Samra felt especially good about the opportunities that female interns have to gain confidence in a role that “guys usually have.” She said, “After they navigate those kids in the dark up Middle Sister, something positive happens to them.”

Samra, Glen, and Rand claim the IEE experiences build confidence and change students in many ways. Joe’s additional comments illustrated their point: “Leading an expedition creates a lot of pressure to have everything right—their welfare is riding on you. Before the internship, I used to worry about a lot of things. I just couldn’t relax. It made me perform less well. But having so much pressure on me broke me of that and helped me learn how to work well under pressure. I found out I can do what needs to be done.”

IEE teachers receive feedback from former students who are in college and beyond and valued their experiences in the program. Some have come back to work with current students. Samra said, “They become our mentors and are more effective than we could ever be. And that speaks for our program and that it’s doing something right for kids. We have former students who are changing the world in their own communities and in other parts of the globe. We think we’re developing in our students passion, awareness, and an appreciation for what’s around them – a sense of place.”

Not only do students grow and develop through the IEE program, but the three teachers are changed as well. Ms. Spear said the experience has made her a better teacher. “Having the opportunity to team teach is so different than what I do in my other classes. I build so many more relationships in these classes than my other ones. And the planning makes it rewarding. It gives me the feeling of being a coach.” One of the students indicated that the teachers were a big reason students liked this program. “They really want the kids to succeed. If one can’t help, another will step in.”

Americana Project. One of the programs that compliment the Sisters art community is the *Americana Project*. It began with the artistic director of the annual Sisters Folk Festival presenting the idea to the SHS music teacher. The SHS teacher is supported by the school and there is other assistance from the Folk Festival. Approximately 60 students take advantage of this program sometime throughout the year. Students who take the courses play guitars and learn history through its music.



There are four different levels of students in the *Americana Project*. Gary Bowne, teacher for the project and contracted through the folk festival, said he has a “dream job” because he sees that the project gives students a purpose and a creative outlet at the same time. They learn to sing or play instruments, write their own songs, and record them. He said songwriting “gives students a healthy way to express joy, anger, trauma, and other emotions.” Students also design their own CD cover and learn other life skills.

Beth, a student in the *Americana program*, said, “Music was never much a part of my life, but now it’s become a big part of me. I started writing music within a week of starting this class. I like writing and performing. I don’t like telling people what’s going on in my life, but this gives me a way to do that without actually having to tell them. It’s a way to release those feelings—with words written into music!” Beth said that being able to compose and perform music has contributed to her life in school. She said, “It helps with understanding other people and myself. It’s helped to give balance to my life. It’s made me enjoy school a lot more. I don’t know why, but since I’ve started writing music, I’ve started liking all my other classes, too. There aren’t any classes that I don’t like anymore. It’s probably because it inspires me to do well in everything, and to enjoy everything. It’s something to look forward to.”

Another student in the *Americana program* was John, who barely passed his classes in middle school, but was now on the honor roll. His mother attributed the latest success to the Americana Project. John himself said, “[The Americana Project] has opened up my creative tract. I’ve sort of broken out of myself—it’s the greatest gift. It’s been great for me to have something to do, because I’m not really into sports.” John also believed writing and singing music relaxed him. “It helps me mellow out and be calmer. It helps me think about things and about conversations in a different way.”

Breedlove Guitar Project. A connected experience to the *Americana Project*, although not required, is the guitar-making class taught by Woods teacher Tony Cosby. Students make guitars in cooperation with the Breedlove Guitar Company. The Breedlove website maintains that the



“building of stringed instruments from wood is the absolute highest form of woodworking.”³ Tony has been trained to teach students how to make the quality guitars, and they build about 34 of them a year. Tony said, “When you work on something for 12 weeks and then it starts making music, it’s just incredible! The kids are really into it.” Students get to keep their first guitar, and any other guitar they make, they have to sell. Last year a student made an electronic guitar that sold for \$3600 at the folk festival. The guitar had been autographed by country singer Vince Gill who attended the event as a fundraiser for the school.

While Tony most directly teaches approximately 45 students how to make Breedlove guitars, he was quick to say he could not do it without the partnership of Jayson Bowerman with Breedlove Guitars. Jayson initially trained Tony, helped create the tooling, and helped make a video tape of the process to use with students.

Another class taught by Tony Cosby was a class on construction. Last year they built a “house in a box” for *Habitat for Humanity*; it was built at the high school and then shipped on a container to Mississippi. Tony said of his classes, “Most students will not build a guitar or a house for a vocation, but it teaches them problem solving. They’re so motivated, they just can’t stop.”

³ Breedlove Guitar Company website: www.breedloveguitars.com

Interventions and Academic Support

Sisters High School hosts several programs for students who need intervention or academic support beyond the usual courses of study. The administration, teachers, and staff create systems to help students succeed. As Mr. Macauley said, “We believe that every kid fits here.”

Heart of Oregon. Dan Saraceno, a counselor at SHS with an MSW and endorsements in health and counseling, thinks SHS is a unique school where “because of the smaller size, we get to know every kid so they don’t fall through the cracks.” Mr. Saraceno started the *Heart of Oregon* program seven years ago for students who have dropped out of school and are now interested in getting their education, usually through a GED. The year-around program of study integrates school to work, so it includes both course work and a work schedule with employment opportunities. Approximately 24 students get paid \$7 an hour, but in order to work, they must continue to go to school. Students have learned cabinetry and made Adirondack chairs that are sold at benefit fundraisers. This gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment. To date, there is a 75% success rate in students meeting the GED requirements.

Partners with *Heart of Oregon* included the Youth Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, Forest Service, and Central Oregon Community College. Dan gave the crew leaders who work with the student employees upmost praise saying, “They make the program work because they help kids connect to real life, and then they can put school into perspective. They are the ones that make the program successful – they are the ones who are out there [with the kids]. If we expect school to do everything that the crew leaders do for these kids, well, it’s not going to happen.”

ZAP and GAS. When students need extra time or motivation to get their work done, they are assigned to either ZAP (Zeros Aren’t Permitted) or GAS (Guided Academic Study). ZAP is a lunchtime program that targets mostly freshman and sophomores and according to assistant principal Mark Stewart “has cut our F list in half.” He said kids are “unzapped” as soon as they’ve made up the work that sent them to ZAP in the first place. GAS is a 50-minute period of time after school four days a week where students also work on unfinished work. Every parent is contacted and has to agree to this intervention.

Other support to help students meet standards includes credit recovery which was started a year prior to this report, and has proved successful. There is also a math lab that uses individualized programs for students who need help on any level, from Pre-Algebra to pre-AP calculus. It is run by the AP calculus teacher and helps no more than 20 students at a time. This same remediation used for math is also used for Language Arts, science, and in the near future, social studies.

Flex School. When students demonstrate certain warning behavior patterns as ninth graders, or fall behind in credits for graduation, or are recommended by staff to join the *Flex* program, a meeting is held with a support team which includes their parents, to help them figure out what they want and need to succeed in school. Mr. Macauley said “You don’t flunk out and then go into *Flex*. We just send them there if things aren’t working. And they can work their way back to ‘regular’ school if they want.” *Flex* is based out of a building adjacent to the main high school building. While students have their own “space” for support and some alternative ways of learning, it is not an independent program. Rather, it is integrated into the rest of the high school. Some students spend part of their day in *Flex* and the other part of the day taking classes with other

students at the high school. Students receive direct instruction in the content areas, work for alternative credits with independent study, participate in an internship program, and take some courses online, all at their own pace. Students may graduate from the *Flex* School and earn a State of Oregon diploma.⁴

One of the students in the *Flex* program was Dakota. From his perspective, “regular school doesn’t work for me.” He said, “Now school is awesome. They have so many things going for me.” Dakota said he transferred to SHS from another Oregon high school where things were “hectic and out of control.” However, he said school is working for him now and he will graduate from high school because of the *Flex* program at SHS. In Dakota’s words, the *Flex* program is for all kinds of students—those who can’t handle “regular school,” those who “get good grades but don’t enjoy the high school scene,” those who “can’t handle the classroom with so many kids because they are distracted or need special attention,” and those who “are in trouble and need a place of support.” Dakota was quick to add that the program was more than just a way to get enough credits to graduate. He said, “We’re all friends and we know each other really well. It’s a family.”



Dakota praised Sisters High School for giving him so many “awesome opportunities.” He appreciated the guitar-making class, but said he was also participating in the Americana Project. Dakota said, “Not only am I building a guitar, I am also learning how to play one.” Dakota called his class a “you-based class where you sit down with a guitar and the teachers sit down and help you learn how to play it, write music, and sing the songs you wrote.” Tony Cosby, the woods teacher, sees that his hands-on woods class is exactly what Dakota needed. He said, “Guitars aside, it’s just good to build that relationship with him. He’ll just sit in here and talk. He’s in here second period when nobody else is, and it’s just good stuff.”

Dakota had a volunteer mentor named Bill, a retired commercial pilot, who worked with him in his classes. Bill praised Sisters High School as a “wonderful school” and a place where “everybody cares.” In addition to Dakota, Bill was available to help other students make guitars in the woods class. He started out volunteering with students in the alternative program, but was now receiving a small stipend through the *Heart of Oregon* grant. The relationship that developed between Bill and Dakota was so strong, that when Dakota was asked if he could have his picture taken, he said, “Bill, I want you in the picture because I am nothing without you.”

Connections with Adults and the Community

The comment made by student Dakota regarding volunteer Bill and their relationship illustrates the tremendous value of adult relationships for students who need someone to care. Mr. Macauley said that at SHS they purposefully connect each student with three adult mentors for their four years in high school: Link, Aspire, and an after-school adult such as a coach or activity director.

⁴ Sisters School District website for Sisters High School Alternative Programs:

http://www.sisters.k12.or.us/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=262&sc_id=1194370007

Suzanne, Mr. Macauley's administrative assistant, said of the adult connections at SHS, "I bet you could stop any student in the hall and say, 'Who's important to you?' and a teacher will come up as that person. It starts when they walk through the door as a freshman and continues until they graduate. Relationships help guarantee success. It makes us happy to come to work. It's not just a job."

ASPIRE program. The *Access to Student Assistance Programs In Reach of Everyone* (ASPIRE) is an Oregon-based program that is grant-funded at Sisters High School. It "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."⁵ According to Laurie Adams, SHS coordinator for ASPIRE, students usually apply to participate in the program, but she negotiated with the administration so that all juniors and seniors at Sisters benefit. As a result, every junior and senior has a mentor that helps them with what they need to do to prepare for life after high school graduation, whether it is college or the work force. In all, there are 40 ASPIRE mentors at SHS, each one spending about 10 hours a month working individually with their students.

To personalize for each student, the ASPIRE office has a "Wall of Fame" on which is displayed a picture of every junior and senior, along with the progress they are making toward college or a vocation. At any time, students can review the steps they have taken to meet their goals. SHS believes this program is making a difference for students, while helping to meet the Oregon diploma graduation requirements. Each student is asked, "*What are your hopes? What are your dreams? How can I help you get there?*" In a time when there are fewer counselors than in the past, the ASPIRE program gives students a rare opportunity to explore a career field and develop a relationship with an adult at the same time.



Ms. Adams shared how adolescents often perceive that adults want something from them, so it takes much of a year for students in the ASPIRE program to realize that there are no specific expectations of them. She tells her volunteers to "know their name, know their dreams, get them to know you are there for them and to trust you, and help them discover what they want to do."

The success stories of ASPIRE demonstrate its effectiveness. Laurie told of one young man who when asked "How can I help you today?" said that the student told the volunteer he wanted to go to college but that he had ADD and his parents couldn't afford his medications. Without his meds, he was sure he would not be able to take college classes. So the mentor took him to the school nurse and got him the support he needed and "sure enough! That young man graduated."

Link. SHS started the *Link* program as a conscious effort to try to make sure every student is known and has a relationship with an adult. Every adult in the building, with the exception of custodians, is a Link leader or mentor for 12-15 students in the same grade that meet once a week for 25 minutes. Mr. Macauley said, "I don't know of a student who slips through the cracks here."

⁵ ASPIRE website: <http://www.aspireoregon.org/about.html>

We have a very low drop-out rate. That includes *Heart of Oregon*. Last year we lost only one out of 600.”

Community Visions. Several years ago, SHS personnel asked the community what they wanted their children to leave SHS having achieved. They hosted six evenings to get people’s opinions on this question. According to Mr. Macauley, persons present were very clear on four things. They wanted SHS to (1) be a caring community, (2) set and achieve high standards, (3) create learning that is engaging, and (4) prepare students who leave high school with confidence that they can be successful in the next stage of their life. Listening to community input helped SHS staff understand another perspective of how they can best prepare future adults.

Complimentary Activities

Aware that students who are involved in school activities are also more satisfied with school, SHS staff works to promote a variety of activities outside of the school day. According to Suzanne, about 83% of the students were involved in some sort of after-school activity. Among others, they included ski teams to Mt. Bachelor, clubs, sports, plays, sponsored trips, and competitions. From Mr. Macauley’s perspective, when students were involved in activities such as these, it contributed to the “whole person” in ways that some classes alone did not. He said they try to find what new hires are already passionate about and then encourage them to use that interest for students. “We had a man interview for a teaching position, but he stated up front that he didn’t coach. I asked him what he liked, which turned out to be mountain biking. He came on board and started a club with forty kids who were interested in mountain biking!”

Students at SHS look forward to an overnight senior trip to Wild Horse Canyon. The trip is at the beginning of graduation week and is a culmination of their high school years when students can look back, evaluate, and debrief about their high school experience. They read letters they wrote in their freshman year about their hopes for where they wanted to be by the time they were seniors four years later. They reflect on their relationships, have a time of reconciliation, listen to a speaker that relates to the students, swim, skate, play basketball, and celebrate their accomplishments.

Mr. Stewart said SHS was making progress toward the development of career academies or pathways. An academy focused on health careers was already functioning, and one related to their business and culinary programs was set to be completed by the spring of 2008. The following year they hope to start four or five more with the goal to place sophomores in them. In order to make the career academies fully operational, SHS was working to strengthen their partnerships with community colleges.

Meeting Oregon’s diploma requirements. Sisters High School had several structures in place to make sure students meet the new diploma requirements. Mr. Macauley pointed out, “When we graduated 134 kids last year, each one of them had a plan for what they were going to do after graduation. They didn’t all go to college. But they all had a plan.” The purposeful planning was a result of a Personalized Education Plan for each student. The effort is coordinated with the middle school as students begin their plan at that level and finalized it in the 9th grade as freshmen. When students are sophomores, the goal is that they will join the academy that corresponds to their educational plan. As a result, the PEP “drives their four-year program.” SHS

was working to make PEPs electronic so parents could access it and have input to their child's high school plans and goals and see the progress being made toward requirements.

Career exploration and planning were being taught specifically in two classes, *Personal Finance* and *Careers*. The *Careers* class was designed for exploration and preparation for the world of work, including job information, decision-making, and educational planning. In these classes, students use the CIS system to explore careers and gain skills in seeking and applying for next steps in their lives, whether it is the work force, trade school, or college. Career Related Learning Standards were being embedded into the core classes. Some internships were already available, but they were working to set up a structured system for job shadows and internship experiences. Oregon diploma requirements were being met and documented through these courses and the ASPIRE program.

Benefits to SHS when high school is “working”

To hear comments of teachers, staff, administration, and students was evidence that school is working for these individuals. Samra Spear, IEE teacher, said the benefit of her involvement in the lives of students was all about the kids. “We love the kids,” she said. “They make me better. My own children even benefit from my energy.” Suzanne, administrative assistant, was back this year after working in another business for a year. She said, “I’m kind of glad I was gone for a year, because it gave me an appreciation for all that goes on around her.” Tony Cosby, woods teacher, talked about the energy he got from teaching students who become both confident and successful. Perhaps the testimonies of students were the voices most important to hear. Dakota, who said he was headed down the path of being a drop-out, praised the high school for the opportunities he was given and for his mentors and teachers who cared so much about him. And for students like Joe, Lani, Nolan, John, and Beth who had opportunities to develop leadership skills and participate in programs that corresponded with their interests, high school was identified as a meaningful time in their lives.

Sisters High School
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http://www.outlawnet.com/outlaw/sisters_highschool/owelcome.htm

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 7, 2008 17 people were interviewed with the overarching question, “What works for kids at Sisters High School?” Participants included the principal, assistant principal, administrative assistant, six teachers, six students, one counselor, and one volunteer. 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 Sisters High School was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.