

Spotlight on Success: South Wasco County High School

“We’re learning how to be a team.”¹

South Wasco County High School (SWCHS) is located in the town of Maupin in the southern part of Wasco County, Oregon. Maupin is a small town of 490 residents 40 miles south of The Dalles on the Columbia River.² Summer brings hundreds of outdoor enthusiasts to this Deschutes River town, particularly white-water rafters. The high school is located near the top of the town high above the river, and with a northeastern view of it. Being rural has both advantages and disadvantages. Some students live 50 miles away and ride the bus for two hours to get to school. 73% of the students are on free and reduced lunches and most students come from families with incomes below the poverty level. According to one teacher, the “at risk” group is the norm at SWCHS.



Despite these odds, in the fall of 2007, SWCHS was honored with a Bronze Medal ranking by *U.S. News and World Report* in their America’s Best High Schools 2008.³ The designation is given to schools that serve all students well, using state proficiency standards as the measuring benchmarks.

Dennis Hickey was in his fourth year as superintendent for South Wasco County School District when this story was written; Ryan Wraught was in his first year as principal of all grades. Ryan is quick to say Dennis does not operate with a “top-down” model. The two of them use a team approach to administration as Dennis mentors Ryan in his new role. School buildings consist of an elementary school (K-6), middle school building (7-8), and a high school building (9-12) with approximately 140 students.

What’s working? Key Components to Success

Programs and classes

Adult Advocacy groups. Adult Advocacy Groups are a recent addition to SWCHS and include a group of 11-12 students of mixed grade levels and one staff member who meet weekly. Students in each group are a mixture of grades 9-12 and stay together throughout their high school years. With this structure, seniors support freshman and the students in lower grades can learn from those in upper grades. The adult assigned to each group establishes a relationship with each

¹ Donna Shewey, Teacher

² <http://www.swasco.net/maupin>

³ U.S. News and World Report, Thursday, January 10, 2008. www.usnews.com/articles/education/high-schools/2007 Retrieved 1/10/08. Analysts at SchoolMatters.com developed the project for a special edition of U.S. News and World Report. Schools were placed into gold, silver, or bronze medal categories.

student and communicates with home, as well as keeps track of grades, behavior, and attendance. In addition to receiving support from an adult, these students were bonding and groups were creating a sense of community. Sis, a teacher, said, "It's fun to watch kids challenging kids. Peers have more power than we ever do." It is during *Advocacy Group* sessions that each student works on her or his Individual Education Plan and Profile. However, plans are being made to include it in the career classes in future years.

Funds from Oregon Department of Education's Capacity Grant were used to train teachers and support one teacher to write the curriculum for others to use. It was their first attempt in using the Professional Learning Community model.

Senior projects. Senior projects are a part of the Senior Seminar class and, according to the teacher where the projects are developed, have developed into very meaningful learning experiences for students. They are designed to meet the standards for Oregon's new diploma requirements. Students planned and implemented significant projects. For example, one student organized an Elementary Health Career Day. Another created Valentine's Day boxes to send to Iraq. Other examples included organizing a Community Recycling Program for computers and parts, developing a fly-fishing curriculum and all the necessary funding for the high school, designing a path between a Health Clinic and Assisted Living Community, designing a new storage shelter for little league baseball, converting a 2-wheel truck to a 4-wheel truck, and preparing and teaching three days of a seventh grade social studies class.



Leadership Class. Both students and teachers frequently mentioned the success of the leadership program (Associated Student Body) at SWCHS. Anavey, a student leader, indicated that they've been very successful in increasing the number of after-school activities and are attracting many students to dances, fundraisers (Pennies for Leukemia, Relay for Life, etc.). She said this can be attributed to students in ASB. "If we know that we want something really bad, we'll get it done."

Anavey and Cassidy attended a RSVP (Raising Students Voice and Participation) training in Seaside. At the local level, RSVP involves students leading students so that every voice is heard. Cassidy and Anavey will train other students so that they can go into classrooms and work with the advocacy groups.

Activities planned by leadership students contributed to positive feelings in the school. Some examples include:

- Wrote a State Farm grant for \$5,000 to put on a week of Safe Driving workshops (SWCHS has no driver's education course).
- Held a community event called "Dancing with the Stars." Numerous references were made to the unexpected success of this event.
- Planned a Career Fair. Ms. Shewey said when it was planned by the teachers, students saw it as "skip day." Now that it is student-planned and student-led, the students come.
- Facilitated activities where high school students interacted with elementary-aged children, as well as those who were residents of the local assisted living facility.

- Worked on ways to raise \$50K to meet a Nike matching grant to acquire a new track.
- Started a community garden

Ms. Shewey, ASB advisor, believes that activities like this help teach problem solving, conflict resolution, schedule planning, and the evaluation process. In most of these activities, connections were formed with the broader community, whereas before, the community only came to sporting events.

Preparation for life after high school.

One of the ways students become prepared for life after high school is by the courses they take, whether required or elective. Students believed even though the school was small, they had a variety of elective classes from which to choose: music, Spanish, art, leadership, and automotive education. They also talked enthusiastically about a class called “Real World Skills” where they learn how to buy a car, buy car insurance, budget, cook, overcome obstacles in life, and other relevant topics that prepare them for adulthood. They also credited high participation in the sports program (70-80% of students) for some student success.

SWCHS is implementing a number of classes, programs, and initiatives to help students prepare for either the work place or for college. Beginning in the school year of 2006-2007, South Wasco County High School required all high school students to take four career-based classes, one each year. These classes explore career opportunities and educational requirements. They also use the CIS system extensively; Career Related Learning Standards are embedded into these classes.



Ninth graders begin working on their career-related learning experiences while taking a one-semester *Tech Tools* class. Throughout this class, students take interest surveys, write self-reflection papers, and conduct initial research in career opportunities.

Tenth graders are required to take *Careers* for one trimester. In this class, students begin to focus on various career tracks and begin to research the different educational and skill levels needed to be successful in these various areas of interest.

Eleventh graders take a one-trimester class called *Future Focus*, in which they take part in high quality job shadows in Portland, Bend, or other areas. They also research one career extensively, write a paper, and make a presentation to their peers and a panel of adults. Students purposely engage in activities that demonstrate their ability to meet the Career-related Learning Standards in this year as well as in their senior year.

Students in twelfth grade take a two-trimester class titled *Senior Seminar*. They work on any kind of paper work related to college or trade school registration, including college applications, financial aid, and scholarship forms. South Wasco requires all students to fill out the FAFSA paperwork. According to one teacher, this has increased their college enrollment. During the class designed for seniors, they also complete their Extended Application, work on a major career-

related research paper and make another presentation to an audience of their classmates, younger students, and adults.

Despite some backgrounds that don't encourage college attendance, some students at SWCHS see themselves as going beyond what is expected of them. Codey said his Dad didn't graduate from high school or go to college, but he would like to do both. He said, "I'd be the first [one] to go to college. It helps me want to go."

Students can actually take college classes online with Marni's help in the Learning Center. Seniors are even encouraged to take advantage of the last three weeks of school after they've gotten their credits to stick around and take a college class online. Every South Wasco County graduate can go to community college in The Dalles at no charge for one semester.

While students are prepared for the option of college, SWCHS teachers also work under the assumption that not everyone is going to college. They use the career classes to help students think beyond "flippin' burgers" for life. At South Wasco, kids used to assume they would go on to work at the mill, but now the mill's gone, so there aren't many opportunities in the immediate area. Teachers encourage students to be ready to compete in the job market and even to leave Maupin for a few years. But they work at instilling pride in the school and community. Mr. Hull is a SWCHS graduate and says it helps when people who went to this school come back as teachers. He said "it proves to the kids that South Wasco grads can amount to something."

Academic support / Multiple pathways to credit

Learning Center (LC). Marni's teaching job involves running the Learning Center, which offers a wide variety of classes and programs all day long, including before school, during lunch, and after school. These include alternative education, special education, distance education, college classes online, remedial work, credit recovery, and GED courses. In addition, the Learning Center provides a productive space for students with temporary behavioral issues. From two to twenty students use the LC at any one time, but there are generally fewer than 10 students working with her.



Homework opportunities. During lunch and again after school (3:30-5:30 pm) are designated times when students may work on their homework and get assistance as needed. A licensed teacher and a 10-year veteran math educational assistant are available to help students with Algebra II as well as other courses. In addition to formal structures for assistance, some teachers are available on an informal basis. Jim, a science teacher, indicated that he goes to school at least three hours early in the morning to do lesson planning and grading, which leaves his afternoons free to focus on students. Sis Lindley, the special education teacher, also works with at-risk students. She has been in the district long enough to know most of the families. Someone says "Sis chases kids down" when they miss class or need her prompting to get their work done.

Smallness contributes to success

Caring environment. From the perspective of students and teachers at SWCHS, the number one reason for South Wasco's success was their smallness. Because of knowing them better, Donna said she is able to teach to more of the whole person. She said "You're able to sort through [what their needs and interests are] and able to be more flexible in how you approach each child." Ginny, a teacher at South Wasco for over 26 years, was surprised that anyone would even notice the school, but she acknowledged how smallness can contribute to students' academic success. She said, "When you are so small, you know your kids so well, and you just refuse to let them fail. It's impossible not to know them!" Ginny said she used to place the responsibility on her students, but decided this year that she was done with zeros and missing assignments, and "that I'm going to do what it takes to get these kids to turn in their work, even if I have to keep them after school and drive them home myself. I've given up my lunch. Things are getting better. I've been doing this all term and now have no D's or F's. We just celebrated last Friday. I'm not saying that it's because I'm a great teacher, but I've been very persistent about refusing to accept zeros.... We just refuse to not let them graduate." Teachers also have a "Kids of Concern" list which alerts them to students who may need special attention or intervention.

Students noticed the contribution teachers made to their academic success. Dakota said, "Teachers help us. They make sure we get good grades. They are focused on us. They want us and push us to get good grades. They sit down and help you with your work. If you don't get it, you can stay after school any day." Codey agreed when he said, "Once I have good grades--that's what pushes me to do even better. This school makes sure you're getting good grades."

Student's comments related to their school environment were similar: "We have our fun, but we like each other. There's no fighting in our school. There are no cliques. Everyone is friends with everyone. When new students come, we welcome them. There are no groups, like preppies or jocks. Everyone is their own person. Everyone gets along with everyone."

Anavey is a student who blossomed after arriving at SWCHS. She lives on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation and since 7th grade, has spent about 1 ½ hours on the road every day. Anavey attributed her involvement in ASB as a way to get to know the school, the students, and the teachers. "It makes it so much better to be here at school. I wouldn't go to any other school, [even] if I had a choice."

Not only do students feel known by the teachers, but parents and community members do too. Relationships have been positive; parents don't hesitate to ask faculty and staff questions, nor do they hesitate to call them when necessary. Ginny said, "I think we communicate with parents more now than we used to. Being small is a real advantage."

Smallness at South Wasco creates a lot of pride in the school. Longevity among teachers is high. Being small can also create an opportunity to be "nimble" and make changes without getting bogged down in a system slow to change. A chance meeting with a South Wasco County School Board member indicated that some success can be attributed to the fact that the high school takes advantage of opportunities available to them.

Opportunities for involvement. Being small may not give students as many choices for ways to be involved in extra-curricular activities, but at South Wasco it seemed that most students were involved in at least one activity outside their academic work. Many students were in sports

and found them to be a good way to spend their time, be recognized, and gain skills. One student said, “We’re so small that we don’t turn anybody down for basketball. Anybody can play.” This was seen as an asset. As one teacher said, “Studies show that the more involved students are, the better their grades will be.” While anyone can be in sports, students also acknowledged that you can only participate in sports if you have no missing assignments. So they recognized the value of sports for their course work as well. About 10 students who live at a distance (up to 30 miles in any direction) take advantage of an after-school activity bus. The bus doesn’t leave school until about 6:00 pm to accommodate students who participate in sports, after-school tutoring, or any other activity.

Jim Hull, the basketball coach, also believed in the value of involvement with sports beyond the games and competitions themselves. For him, coaching was a vehicle that helped him get to know the students in a different way outside of the classroom, which means “I am better able to meet their needs inside the classroom.”

Teachers and administrators making a difference

Professional learning community. Some staff and faculty participated in professional development opportunities which changed their thinking and ways they teach. Two years ago Mr. Hickey and Mr. Wraught went to a Richard DuFour conference on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The following year they used Oregon Department of Education’s Capacity Grant funds to institute a PLC with a small group of four teachers. These teachers met regularly “to study issues and decide on and implement strategies for positive change.”⁴ In addition they did book studies, such as *Bridges out of Poverty*,⁵ since many of their students are in families of poverty. Following that year, these teachers also went to a PLC conference and completely bought in to the concept, changing their thinking philosophically, and realizing that with this kind of collaboration and support they really could change their school.

Teachers were clear that their administrators had been supportive of professional development opportunities, and that changes taking place were beneficial for everyone. Sis said of her colleagues, “I’ve always felt that our staff is one that is willing to get in there and try new things. For example, the trimester schedule. Some of us went to Redmond and studied their system. We tried it for a year. We’re willing to see what works.” Mr. Hickey and Mr. Wraught were also supportive of changes suggested by teachers and provided resources when it fit the mission of the school. As Marni said, “It makes me want to be a part of what’s going on.”

⁴ Dennis Hickey

⁵ Payne, R.K., Devol, P., & Smith, T.D. (2001). *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities*. Highlands, TX: RFT Publishing.

Superintendent support. Will came to Wasco his junior year from another school. He said, “This is a lot better. In [my previous school] I was doing drugs and it wasn’t very good. Here I’m not into drugs. I wanted to turn my life around and try and graduate. I’ve got everything going for me now, so I wouldn’t change.” Will



talked about the two people who made the biggest difference for him, “Mr. Hickey and Ms. Lindley keep on me because they care a lot about the students here. Here I get support from teachers and parents.” According to Mr. Wraught, Mr. Hickey had mentored Will ever since he arrived. “Dennis can work with those kids. At any other school district, Will would have been out. But when a

superintendent mentors someone, it is huge.” Another student gave credit to Mr. Hickey as well. “He’s been here 4-5 years. The first 3 years were rough. But now we realize he is here to help. Everything is falling in place now. There used to be [lots of problems]. But we’re trusted now.” Yet another story demonstrated how each student was recognized for their potential and given whatever support they needed in order to succeed. A student by the name of Daniel (pseudonym) came to them highly at risk, but ended up graduating and going on to Linn Benton Community College. Mr. Hull said, “The superintendent and some teachers put a lot of hours into this one kid, but we’re willing to do that for any student.”

One teacher brings new energy. While a single person alone can’t change the culture of the school, one teacher at South Wasco came close. In interviews with students, staff, and the administration, Donna Shewey’s name came up in almost every conversation as someone who had made a difference at SWCHS. She came as a teacher three years ago from the corporate world and with her own consulting business, making a lot more money than she currently makes as a teacher. Donna brought other experiences with her -- instructor at the community college level, work with municipal governments, marketing director for an assisted living community, and speaker for national conferences. Her colleagues described her as someone who was not afraid to take risks, had energy that was contagious, had connections with agencies and organizations, and was creative in her roles.



Part of the reason Mrs. Shewey’s influence was so broad was because she taught courses that all students took and she was the advisor for activities that attracted participation from all students. She taught PE, health, leadership, Senior Seminar, and Junior Focus. In addition, she was the ASB advisor. In these roles, she made enough changes to affect the culture of the school.

Donna completely revamped the PE program for both boys and girls. Her focus is on life-long sports, so she introduced biking, golfing, swimming, and bowling. Before school is out in 2008, she will have added fly-fishing to PE classes. She and a student who is the son of a river guide solicited and received a donation of money which they used for fishing reels and boats. An added benefit for students is that local retirees will be volunteering their fishing expertise with the students.

Ms. Shewey wrote grants to purchase new equipment, pay for field trips, and hold community events. She has ideas and is not afraid to take risks. In order to add biking to the PE curriculum,

she needed bikes and they had no money to buy any. So she put out two advertisements, one in Maupin and one in Portland. As a result, 15 used bikes were donated. They needed repairs, but she discovered that a couple of students who struggle academically were excellent bike mechanics, so they were given the task of getting the bikes ready to use. These students took pride in the importance of this work. Similarly, there was no golf equipment. But Donna solicited donations of golf clubs and money for green fees once a term. Students mainly “golfed” on the football field, but at the end of each term, they were able to experience a real golf course.

Donna finds it hard to talk about what she does without interjecting her philosophy. “Every teacher is responsible for every student,” she said. “It’s important for high school teachers not to view themselves as ‘independent contractors.’ They all have a lot of freedom, and they all have different styles of doing things, but ultimately they have the same goal and need to work as a team.” She talked about the importance of teachers staying fresh and energized to do their job. Donna said, “Teachers need to do whatever it takes to keep that positive, upbeat attitude, no matter how long you’ve been teaching. If you’re stuck, change something, DO something so that you don’t get bored.”

Ms. Shewey did not want attention drawn toward her. “This isn’t about self-gratification,” she said. “I’ve been out in the corporate world and had enough ‘success’ to last me. This is all about the kids.” Donna said she didn’t see herself as any better than the teachers who have been at SWCHS for 20 or 30 years, but she recognizes that she has brought new energy and new ideas to the job. She also said that the courses she teaches allow her to be more creative than some other classes. “This is the hardest job I’ve ever had,” she said. But it also gives me the most autonomy of any job I’ve ever had.” As one teacher put it when she talked about Donna, “In a small school, one staff member can change the dynamics a lot.”

Benefits to SWCHS when high school is “working”

From the perspective of teachers and students, SWCHS is working for many. Mr. Hull said, “I love watching kids leave school and move beyond what’s here in Maupin. Seeing the results of all the work and extra hours [I’ve put in] makes it worthwhile. I love that kids can come back and say, ‘South Wasco did this for me.’ They have pride in where they grew up, but they see beyond this.”

When asked what a successful school looks like, the panel of students shared several characteristics. They said students have improved behavior, are involved, are happy, get along with each other, and do not complain about their teachers. They rated SWCHS as having all of these qualities.

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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 1, 2008 12 people were interviewed with the overarching question, “What works for kids at South Wasco County High School?” Participants included the

superintendent, principal, five teachers, and five 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 SWCHS was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.