

Spotlight on Success: Sprague High School

“I love my job--I couldn’t ask for a better one. But meeting with kids? That’s the best thing in the world.”

Sprague High School (SHS) is located in Salem, Oregon and is one of six comprehensive high schools in the Salem-Keizer School District. Approximately 1750 students in grades 9-12 attend Sprague in the southwestern area of the city. The principal of Sprague High School is Cheryl Bower, who has been the top administrator at Sprague for three years and in the field of education for 33 years.

Mary Leach-Provancha is one of three assistant principals at SHS. She has been in administration at Sprague for eight years after teaching for 11 years in another Oregon school district. Ms. Provancha believes her administrative position gives her the opportunity to help and work with many people—teachers, students, and parents. She described Sprague as an “amazing place” that cares about those both within the building and in the community beyond.



What’s working? Key Components to Success

Programs, Academic Support, and Interventions

Students at Sprague High School have a variety of opportunities which will help them achieve what is academically required of them. These include a number of programs, support, and interventions. Some are a required, some are optional, and some are based on need.

S Cubed. Ms. Provancha developed and supervises *S Cubed* (Sprague Student Success Program) in order to help at-risk students achieve proficiency in the standards required for their courses. Kristen Andersen is the coordinator of *S Cubed*, now in its second year. She was in her seventh year teaching English at Sprague and also has her administrative license. The program served about 70 students in its first year; many of those continued in its second year.

Students in *S Cubed* take core area content classes including English, social studies, science, and math from a group of teachers who utilize a team teaching approach. The team of teachers, two instructional assistants, and Ms. Andersen had four periods of *S Cubed* plus some additional guided study halls. Ms. Gordon, one of the team teachers said “it’s like having a small community within the school.” Students are also supported with breakfast, monitoring, guided study hall, regular communication with families, and a counselor who teaches problem

¹ Phil Nickel, Teacher

solving and transitioning skills. “During the first six weeks the focus is on getting the kid to believe in himself,” Ms. Provancha said, “By the twelfth week, we’re working on the parents to get them to believe in their kid again.”

Students in *S Cubed* are taught to self-monitor. They are required to write reflections at progress report times--why they have the grades they do and what they can do about it. Ms. Provancha said at first students tends to write, “This is stupid,” but by the end, “they are really tuned in and realize what this program is doing for them.”

Ms. Andersen places a lot of importance on building ongoing relationships. She said she has daily contact with parents through phone or email. In addition, parents meet with the child and teachers to develop an educational plan. “A lot of parents tell me that I’m their new best friend. I am on a first name basis with most of them right off the bat. I have to teach them how to help their kids.” Ms. Provancha said parents love the involvement once they get past the initial steps. She said “they are so used to being told bad things about their kid that they are often hesitant at first.”

Ms. Andersen said her relationship is so close to the parents that she even advises them on difficult issues such as “where the kids are going online, drugs, alcohol, and pregnancy.” She said, “I am very direct; I just lay it out. Parents rarely get angry with me, even when I discipline their kid, because they know I understand. I ask them what I can do to help them, and they need that.” Mary Provancha also praised *S Cubed* for “amazing results” because of the relationships developed. She said, “I believe you can change behaviors just by developing relationships with kids.”

One *S Cubed* success story is about Daniel, a student who started in the program as a freshman and continued this year as a sophomore. He said because he was failing last year, he joined the FINAO program, which means “failure is not an option.” This year FINAO was changed to *S Cubed*. Daniel said the *S Cubed* program looks at the grades for the incoming freshman, especially in English, social studies and science. If you’re not doing well in those, then you’re recommended for the program. But then you have to apply. Last year, they contacted my parents by phone. I was in a foster home, and I transitioned home in the middle of the year. The school contacted my biological parents, and they said they’d be fine with this.”



Daniel credits *S Cubed* for what makes school work for him. It makes him want to come to school each day and succeed in life. He said, “If I hadn’t been in this program, I would not have been doing too well. Last year, I had two F’s and some D’s. At the end of the first six weeks of the second semester this year, I had nothing below a C.” When asked what it was that made *S Cubed* work for him, he replied “They track all your core class assignments and make sure you’re keeping up. If not, they’ll make a priority list for you. That really helped me a lot. Sometimes if I really need a down day, I can work things out so that I can spend the whole day in the classroom of one of the study hall teachers. That’s really helped me too. They’re willing to drop everything and help you. They really focus on what you need and help you develop plans to succeed.” Daniel also mentioned that the smaller environment of *S*

Cubed made it easier to communicate and that he felt cared for. “Yeah, I can go to them if I need anything.”

Ms. Andersen talked about Daniel from a staff perspective. She said, “He needed some quiet time to organize and have the one-on-one support of the IA’s.” Some challenges at home and a bus ride from another high school in Salem caused him to have to “get on a bus at something like 5:30 in the morning to come here, but he doesn’t miss a day. He could go to [his other school], but he doesn’t.” When asked why he crosses town to go to Sprague, Ms. Andersen said, “I expect it’s because of the connections he has made here. I think that’s more important than anything. For Daniel and some of these other kids, school is the only place where they have healthy adult relationships and where they feel safe.”

Daniel was excited about an opportunity he’ll have next year as an upperclassman. He will be able to help newer struggling students by sharing his experiences with them. He said the school just started a program called *Link* and he was asked to be a Link Leader. That means “I’ll be partnered with one other upperclassman and we’ll have a group of ten underclassmen. We’ll work with them the first week and see how they’re doing, and then periodically throughout the year, we’ll get together as a group and see how everybody’s doing. We’re recommended by teachers, which says something. I may not have the best grades, but I’ll be able to keep my grades up. I know I will.” Daniel said that as a freshman he was part of the marching band; this year he wasn’t involved in anything “because of moving,” but next year he was hoping to be in cheerleading.

While Daniel described the reasons for his opportunity to be a Link Leader, Ms. Andersen shared the perspective of the staff regarding Daniel’s opportunities. She said they were putting Daniel into the leadership class because “the low-end need to be in with the cream of the crop, and that’s how we’ve set the program up. All of our at-risk kids are in regular classes, except for the guided study hall.”

By the beginning of May 2008, *S Cubed* coordinators had identified 75 incoming freshmen for the 2008-2009 school year “who pretty much failed middle school. Those kids will be in one of the *S Cubed* classes, but they’ll also be in there with higher achieving kids.” Students around campus know about the *S Cubed* program, and some students even ask to join the program. They also have parents calling to request that their kid be admitted to the program. “We look at attendance and discipline and meet with every parent before we let the kid in the program so that they really understand that it’s as much about home as it is about school.”

The first two years of *S Cubed* have been a “huge success,” according to Ms. Provancha. “We had 143 credits achieved in content areas. The data shows we improved their GPAs and also reduced the number of discipline issues.”

Advisories. According to teacher Ms. Andersen, one of the great ways Sprague builds relationships with students is through the *Advisory* program, started only last year. Each teacher has the same 20-24 students for four years. They deal with a lot of personal things, but if something gets beyond their abilities, they get help from the counseling center.

Mr. Rodin, teacher of math and computer education, was also one of the faculty identified as an Instructional Leader, because of his role as the coordinator of advisory groups. He believed *Advisory* was good for students for three reasons: (1) It helps them obtain and keep track of their graduation requirements, (2) It gives them an adult advocate and a small group of students to be connected to for four years, and (3) They are taught survival and study skills.

Each year of the Advisory program, students have a specific theme. For the freshman year it is “Who am I?” which helps them develop the Oregon-required “Education Plan and Profile.” Sophomores think about “What do I want to do?” as they consider various careers and participate in a required job shadow. During the junior year, students think about “How do I get there?” Seniors consider how to “Spit and Polish.”

The graduation requirements alluded to above specify that students show proficiency in each of six Career-Related Learning Standards (CRLS) and also show the Extended Application of those standards outside of the classroom. The Career-Related Learning Standards incorporate skills developed throughout the school and through school activities. These skills should also be demonstrated in the community, in activities and/or in jobs. According to their website, Sprague’s model is one that “incorporates a checklist of items for each standard and also a reflection paper that tells how the student has applied those skills and has met the Extended Application requirement.” It goes on to say that instead of required careers classes, the *Advisory* program was chosen as a vehicle for meeting the career-related diploma requirements. Seniors work with their advisors to make sure they have completed their Senior Checklist and their CRLS Reflections.²

Sprague’s advisory program won an award last year because of how they were using CIS (Career Information Systems) within *Advisories*. CIS helps students complete and document the components required for graduation. The use of six computer labs for 25-30 minutes will be increased to eight computer labs next year, allowing more students to use CIS during advisory periods.

At SHS there is a team of teachers who share some leadership for the advisory program. Every time there is an advisory group with students, the faculty team meets to discuss what worked and what didn’t. The group is looking at a possible change in the function of advisories to be more project-based and have the students complete their career related learning standards and other diploma requirements during their junior year. If this could take place, Ms. Provancha said students’ senior year would be all community service and/or in some way supporting the younger students.

Ms. Provancha’s premise was that SHS was right on target with the new diploma requirements. She said, “Oh, we’re the best. We really have it down. We have an amazing career specialist. We use the CIS checklist model and won an award for implementing it. [CIS] allows us to keep an electronic record and add to it as they go along.”

² Sprague High School website link: <http://sprague.wvi.com/>

Homework Club. Several persons, including students, mentioned the effectiveness of the Homework Club and that it was one of the things that contributed to the success of their students. Dale Adkins, science teacher started the “club” which he downplays as anything creative. He said he just “gave it a name and a nice little system.”

S-K Online. Salem-Keizer Online serves approximately 280 kids across the district, so was not unique to Sprague. However, the credit recovery program with numerous classes was available for students to work on at home or at school. Mr. Adkins said he had seen many students be “unsuccessful in a classroom situation, but be much better in a computer situation because social interaction wasn’t part of the equation anymore. I’ve had students completely thrive in this environment. Some have even taken three semester classes in one semester.”



Tyler credited the program for letting him work at home at his own pace. “I can do the easy stuff first and then the harder stuff later or visa versa,” he said. He had taken six classes in this format and said he would probably not be on track to graduate if it weren’t for *S-K Online*.

W3. A program only discussed by one student was W3. Tyler said he benefited from “Wildlife, Watershed, and Whatnot,” an outside school program run by their biology teacher. As a result of his involvement in W3, he was able to travel to Poland to an international, environmental conference.

Motivation for Achievement

Classroom Teachers. Sprague High School teachers and students repeatedly praised teachers for the quality of their teaching and for making classes relevant to students. “I think success depends not on the structure ... but on the teacher in the classroom,” said Mr. Nickel who was in his 12th year of teaching social studies at Sprague and is the department chair. “If you want change, hire well. That is what gets you results.” Mr. Adkins shared Mr. Nickel’s sentiment when he said, “I think everything happens in the classroom. The students are the priority.”

Several students would agree. When asked what made Sprague a great school, Daniel said, “It’s pretty much the teachers.” Jai said, “Sprague has a great teaching staff.” And to the same question, Karen said, “Sprague is a really strong school because of great teachers who connect with kids and invest themselves in the lives of their students.”



Students and teachers at Sprague described their perception of what a good teacher was. Jai, a student taking upper level courses with a 3.94 GPA, said “It’s someone who gives you enough work to push you, but not just busy work. They stick with what they say they are going to do. They use tough love.”

Numerous examples of excellent teaching were shared. Mr. Nickel talked about the German teacher who has been “doing more than just what the book tells him

to do for years.” In order to connect students with the German culture and apply classroom learning to the real world setting, he organizes annual trips to the Rhinelander Restaurant in Portland, taking more than a hundred students every trip. For the last two years, he organized an end of the year play in German. The students write the script in German and are completely in charge of what needs to be done to produce a play.

Mr. Nickel also described a young science teacher who created a CSI game for his students. They had to collect genetic material and try to figure out who murdered a “body.” Class discussions following the game were about related issues, such as getting a search warrant before DNA is collected.

A social studies teacher started the Global Relief Club. He takes what students are studying in Global Issues and helps them channel it into action. This year the focus was on Africa, so the club worked all year to purchase mosquito netting for African families.

On at least one occasion, Mr. Nickel took his Art History students downtown to discover alphabetic shapes in the environment. With a digital camera, students were to photograph the alphabet without taking any pictures of actual letters. He said, “We have to look beyond what we do in the classroom to help students think about how it affects the world beyond us.”

Mr. Adkins said he tries to connect with different kids and different learning styles. “I try to bring in things that seem to have nothing to do with what’s going on class. For example, I try to have a nature moment every day. And I don’t ignore media. Many teachers tend to ignore it, but I embrace it,” he said. He went on to say that he tries to have activities that engage different learning styles in each period—“some sort of moving around, some sort of a break, small segments of teaching, frequent redirection, and something to draw them in and help keep kids focused.”

Teacher of English and College Writing Karri Gordon indicated that her participation as an Instructional Leader was an asset for her own professional development. As the English department Chair, she is one of nine teachers in leadership positions that meet regularly with each other.

Ms. Andersen believed that some of the Sprague success was a result of being aware of the good things they were doing. “We work better as a team when we know that things are working.”

Caring. A culture of care begins with the administrators. Ms. Andersen said, “Cheryl is amazing when it comes to anything that will save a kid. She’ll keep you running. She never stops. She is always researching and sending us new information, asking our opinion on new ideas and programs. I call her the head cheerleader of the building; she’s so positive. Cheryl believes in her staff.”

Good relationships between staff and students may be a result of good relationships between staff members. According to Ms. Andersen, “We have a dedicated and loyal staff here with a low turnover rate. We have an excellent team. We know how to build relationships.

Everything goes back to building relationships with kids.” Departments are very close and do a lot of things together. At a grading day, for example, the English department had a BBQ together and opened it up to anyone who wanted to attend. When the mother of one of the students had brain surgery, the staff took them meals and Easter baskets for the children in the home. An administrator had surgery and also felt supported by students and staff in similar ways.

Because they are realizing that many of their students are hungry, next year Mrs. Provancha plans to start a food bank with snacks available for students. Other students may be involved by soliciting funds for the food. Mrs. P. said they also look out for students who, for example, want to go to the prom but can’t [because of the cost]. “There’s a group of us who will make sure they have tickets and supplies. But it’s all done quietly.”



Tyler was a student who said he had been in trouble “quite a lot.” As a result, he knew Ms. Provancha well! Yet, he said he had a good relationship with her because “she helps me when I’m frustrated about something. She calms me down and kind of puts it in perspective for me.”

Jai described a student for whom Sprague’s demonstration of “caring” had influenced in a positive way. “I knew a kid who never did his homework and didn’t get very good grades but really liked coming to school for the classes because he loved the environment and the teachers. He loved their passion for learning.”

Preparation for the Future. Ms. Provancha believes that Sprague High School has programs for all kids at all levels. So it is deliberate about making sure students are prepared for college or the work force. “This hasn’t always been true,” she said. “We’ve realized that not all of our kids are headed for four-year colleges.” Several certified programs in Career and Technical Education provide a need for students who may or may not be heading for college. “Our computer tech program is so great that many of our graduates will be hired by Microsoft without further training,” said Ms. Provancha.

Mrs. Provancha went on to say that SHS offers college credit coursework that is taken at the high school, but through the community college. In addition, “AP is huge here. We probably test more kids than anybody in the district. We have College Prep Math, College Writing, and numerous advanced level classes with great teachers that work really hard,” said teacher Karri Gordon. Some students were also working with the Early College High School program at Chemeketa Community College.

Extra Curricular Activities.

Students at Sprague had numerous opportunities outside of their academic circles. These activities provided additional meaning to the high school experience for those involved. According to Ms. Provancha, a new activities director was focusing on support for the Sprague community, as well as the community outside the four walls of the high school. One such

community outreach event was an Oly Luau at no charge to attendees, complete with BBQ, music, and activities for children.

According to junior student Karen, there were many opportunities with which to be involved. In fact, she believed that “being involved” was one of the most important reasons that SHS works for kids. She cited sports (club sports as well as state competitions), clubs (i.e., foreign language, environmental, equestrian, DECA), speech team, drama, band, music (award-winning competitions—won a Grammy in 2007-2008) as examples of ways to be involved.

Karen’s activities may have been unique, but she demonstrated how important extra curricular activities were to her. Her long list of involvements included: speech team, debate team, writer for the *Statesman Journal* on a regular weekly basis (a paid position), newly-elected Editor-in-chief for next year’s yearbook, newly elected Club President for the Youth Legislature (the YMCA Youth in Government program), Salem Chamber of Commerce’s Leadership Youth Program, and cello player for the symphony orchestra. For Karen, being involved in these activities “enables me to get to know a lot of different teachers and see different aspects of Sprague that I wouldn’t otherwise get to see. I’ve developed a career goal of becoming a political journalist because of being involved in these different things. Being involved opened my eyes to a lot of potential interests.”



Karen realized the importance of school and that she needed to get good grades, but she was aware that her few B’s may not be as important as “doing things outside the classroom so I can go to college and be able to do anything I want to later in life. The main reason I want to be here is so I can be involved because ... I know that it’s valuable in the long run. I do like my classes, but it’s knowing there is something more than classes. It gives me something to look forward to and be excited about.” Karen credits her mother with encouraging her before she ever started high school to become involved during her freshman year. Karen chose to follow her mother’s advice and realized how much fun it was to be involved. In the process, she developed other interests and became hooked on taking advantage of as many experiences as she could.

Benefits to SHS when high school is “working”

Administrator and teacher comments were consistent about the rewards they received as a result of working with adolescents at Sprague. Ms. Provancha stated that one of her greatest rewards was when a student brings in a daily tracking sheet with a huge smile of their face and says, “Look what I did!” She said, “If I can help a kid, right there is my reward.”

Phil Nickel said, “I love my job--I couldn’t ask for a better one. But meeting with kids? That’s the best thing in the world. What makes it good? Watching a kid ‘get it,’ watching him struggle and fight through something, not pushing him too hard so that he gets discouraged, but enough so that he grows.”

In closing, Karri stated she loved her job and believed that when school was working for students and teachers, “the kids are willing to learn. When they leave, they can make it on their own and have a better quality of life.” Mr. Rodin’s comment was similar when he said, “The biggest benefit is for the students. If school is working for them, they have a better sense of what they want to do and how to get there.”

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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 May 9, 2008 11 people were interviewed with the overarching question, “What works for kids at Sprague High School?” Participants included an assistant 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 SHS was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.