

Spotlight on Success: Tillamook High School

“We’re trying to make as many connections with different groups, organizations, businesses, agencies, community colleges, and universities...to build bridges, partnerships, and networks.”¹

Tillamook High School (THS) is located in Tillamook County on the northern Oregon Coast. The school serves 700 students in grades 9-12, and is the only high school in the Tillamook School District of 2070 students. The Tillamook area economy is dependent on dairy farms, lumber mills, and tourism. The Tillamook Cheese Factory is known for its cheese and gourmet ice cream, and is a very popular tourist stop on this coastal Highway 101. The lumber industry has made a comeback in recent years. The town of Tillamook has approximately 4500 residents², but students come from the surrounding coastal mountain areas.

There are 34 teachers at Tillamook High School. Bruce Rhodes is the only principal and is in his fifth year in this position. Previous to being the principal there, he was the principal at another Oregon high school, vice principal at THS, and prior to that, a teacher at THS. Tillamook County is an economically depressed area and 44% of the students are on free and reduced lunches.

What’s working? Key Components to Success

Partnerships with the community

Community relationships. One of the most distinct characteristics of THS is the connection it has to the Tillamook community and surrounding area. These relationships are a direct result of two persons, one at the high school and one at the district office, whose job it is to create partnerships with entities in the community. Mr. Rhodes explained, “What’s working here? I think it’s the exact thing we’re trying to do – make as many connections with different groups, organizations, businesses, agencies, community colleges, universities...that’s a real push of ours to try and build bridges and partnerships and networks. We’ve done a really good job of getting outside our little box of THS and making this a bigger broader place. And people hear about that. And it pays off [in their desire to join us in something].” Ed Armstrong and Clair Thomas do much of the time-consuming work of relationship-building, grant writing, and setting up projects, giving teachers time to teach concepts and relate class work to the community environment.

Community partnerships in Tillamook are as they should be -- a result of the school district and community working together on projects that are mutually beneficial for both entities. “It’s the power of the collective



¹ Bruce Rhodes, Principal

² Wikipedia website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tillamook,_Oregon

vision,” said Ed. “I hope that you hear we’re doing [good things], but behind all of that, I hope you hear that we have a school board, a superintendent, and administrators that had a collective vision. It’s a lot easier when you’re on the same page to make decisions.” Ed feels passionately that it is not about the money. “Money helps,” he said, “but if you’re doing collective work that really supports a community vision, the money is there! We couldn’t have built the turf field – it’s an impossible thing for a Tillamook to do. Yet in 4 ½ months, we had enough resources and money to build it.”

Natural Science Program. Most of the relationships with the community have to do with natural resources—fresh and marine water/biology, agriculture, and forestry. As a result of the partnerships developed, the *Natural Resource Program* at the high school is a successful and growing two-year program. It is connected directly to the science department and thrives because of so many ways for students to gain valuable experiences in natural resources. Tillamook and the Coast provide abundant opportunities for students to actively participate in a wide range of projects throughout the entire county; these are coordinated by Clair Thomas, a veteran teacher who works with teachers, students, and community members to establish these projects.

It is impossible to separate the community partnerships Mr. Armstrong establishes and the Natural Science Program set up by Mr. Thomas. These activities are often integrated and overlapping. As a result, there are some common activities for students at THS which result in district alignment. The resulting programs benefit students while they attend THS, plus give them many opportunities to succeed as they transition out of high school.

Partnership activities include:

- Day in the Forest and Day at the Bay—students spend the day doing field studies as it relates to the environment and habitat
- Data collection for the Tillamook Creamery, Tillamook Estuary, Munson Creek State Park, at fisheries, and in the forest
- Creation of kiosks with information on invasive species for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the BLM
- Salmon Watch -- High school students teaching elementary students
- Senior project with a methane digester (took manure from a raw product to the creation of enough gas to power 400 homes, and resulted in the improved health of a farm)
- Millwright training program (Industrial Maintenance Technician) with Hampton and Stimson Lumber Mills and Tillamook Bay Community College
- George Fox University Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program—TSD teachers and students work with future teachers in summer educational programs; TSD teachers participate in science-related professional development
- Oregon Forest Research Institute – works with teachers to provide guest speakers and buses for field trip to Oregon Gardens

Ms. Lindsay, Natural Resources teacher, believed her students had a heightened awareness of natural resources concepts as a result of all the hands-on activities they experienced. She said, “They are able to explain the life cycle of salmon, the impact different chemicals have on that life cycle, why oxygen is important to the salmon, and why size of gravel matters....I would definitely say they know more than a lot of adults do about salmon and their importance, and the indications of how an ecosystem is doing.”

Alignment of vision

The partnerships described in the preceding paragraphs are a result of a school district that focuses on its vision and aligns itself with the community in numerous ways. School personnel and community partners are working together as two entities on numerous projects, but it is significant that this is not a random practice. Instead, it is a deliberate effort and one that guides their practice. The district website states, *The mission of the Tillamook School District in partnership with the community is to prepare our students with academic, artistic, professional-technical and social skills necessary to become lifelong learners in a changing world, by providing a high-quality curriculum, a well-trained staff, well-maintained facilities and a wide variety of extracurricular activities.*³

It's not a one-prong attack. It's not about money, improving teaching, or improving programs. Instead it's about a collective vision and a trust between each other. That's the power. So the vision is far more important than the money. The money will come as long as the vision guides resource attainment.

(E. Armstrong)



Because community partnerships are a direct result of the school district's vision, students in Tillamook are encouraged and taught to not only receive from the community, but also to give back. Ms. Lindsay said, "I tell my students that while you're having fun on this project, we're also going to learn how to make a difference in our community."

Preparation for the future creates relevance

Students interviewed at THS often gave teachers the most credit for the positive things happening at Tillamook. Edgar, a junior student, said "Teachers make the difference." Megan agreed when she said, "Teachers help me through school more than the school itself. I can go to any of my teachers and they can help me on anything."

Edgar was also pleased that he could start taking courses for college credit. He shared that the *Pathways Program* was helpful to higher-level students who wanted to attend college after high school.



Receiving college credits while in high school was not the only way students could prepare for life after high school. The strong partner relationships with the community pay off in assisting students prepare to join the local workforce. For example, students can receive millwright training through a joint project between the Tillamook School District and Hampton Stimson Lumber Mills and Tillamook Bay Community College (mentioned in the list of partnerships above). The Industrial Maintenance Technician (IMT) project is for students who may not go beyond a high school diploma, or beyond an Associate of Arts degree. Ed Armstrong said the uniqueness of this partnership was that "the companies actually hire our graduates as employees after they graduate and fully pay for their associate's degree. So when they're sitting in class getting their AA degree,

³ Source: Tillamook SD website: www.tillamook.k12.or.us

they are getting paid the same wage they are as when they are working in the mill. They were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars a year trying to recruit a skilled work force. Now they've reinvented how they spend that money and are investing in both our kids and in their facility."

THS students indicated that there were many opportunities in which they could be involved in relevant and meaningful activities, in the classroom, after school, and in the hallways. For example, Megan said, "At my other school, I didn't socialize at all; they didn't care or do anything to help me be successful. Everyone here makes me feel like I can actually be someone. I get more help and am more involved in school than ever. It makes me think I can be something when I get out of school myself."

Opportunities for involvement included the ability to take courses at Tillamook Bay Community College, Peer Mediation, Charity Drive (in which they made close to \$115,000.00 this year), and FFA (Future Farmers of America). Megan also appreciated that some of her favorite activities were also a class (Speech and Agriculture) because she said it helped her keep her grades up. Todd saw relevance in his Natural Resources class when he said, "It didn't seem so much like school a lot of the time. It seemed more fun, more like a job or something you enjoy more than school. It was different." And Nick didn't have any idea he had interest in a career in forestry until he had class experiences that sparked his interest in the field. He said, "Otherwise, it never would have crossed my mind."



Classroom Experiences. Students also indicated they saw relevance to their future and believed they were being prepared for life after high school. Mr. Sherman is licensed in and teaches Basic and Advanced Agriculture, Welding, and Plant Science (Biology). The facility includes a greenhouse, a small computer lab for research, classroom, and a large shop area. Max incorporates metal art, hydroponics, micro-propagation, genetic research, soil sampling, and a small tissue culture lab into his classes. He tries to integrate as many content areas into his classes as possible; students actively integrate agriculture with mathematics, art, photography, and English. Mr. Sherman includes mostly project-based work into his classes because he believes "it allows students to express themselves, have successes, and a chance for integration of the concepts." As a result of doing relevant projects, he said students see how they can apply their knowledge to their future.



Student Connections to the Community. THS staff was consistent in their work of preparing students for the future, again in alignment with the district's mission. While Mr. Thomas' position was to create partnership opportunities for students, he also believed his role was to prepare students for their life after high school. He said, "My view of education has always been to involve students directly in the community in meaningful projects that impact their community. [I also want them] to do state-of-the-art science research so they can present and pick up scholarships and have opportunities to meet people in the field and jump start their whole career."

One way to provide relevance is to prepare students for jobs in their community where they are most likely to be after high school. Mr. Hawley, a teacher working on his administrative license, articulated this when he said, “Students have to have a sense of why [school] matters to them—relevance. How will this affect the rest of their lives? A lot of programs don’t have any relevance to the majority of the kids who will stay here. So there is an emphasis on the natural resources, lumber mill jobs, or the cheese factory because the kids are going to stay here anyway so why not train them to do the jobs that are here? Take them out and show them real world examples. That’s the direction the district is going. Good administrators, good superintendent, great support staff. Student centered. Fun for teachers.”

Preparation for Careers. For students, relevance may come in the form of knowledge and experience in a career of interest. At Tillamook, high school students begin their career exploration in Kindergarten and continue throughout their K-12 experience. It is embedded throughout the system so that when they reach high school, meeting diploma requirements is not just a “check-off” activity but one that is meaningful and authentic.

The partnership model in Tillamook naturally helps students in K-8 begin to explore various careers. They do this through exposure to professionals in various careers—research scientists, mill workers, loggers, forestry specialists, etc. On a small scale, students also explore what it is like to work in these fields as they complete authentic projects which give them first-hand experiences doing what they would do in the field as an adult.

So one of the goals of THS teachers is to assist students in reflecting on their K-8 experiences and then use that information to guide them during their high school years. For example, as freshmen, students write an *I-Search* career paper where they take their K-8 experiences and begin to pick several careers on which to focus. After working on this paper, students create a 4-year plan, their Education Plan and Profile, to guide them during their four years in high school. The plan is put into the context of the Career Related Learning Standards (CRLS) and revised as needed throughout high school.

All through their high school years, students determine and document ways they have demonstrated the CRLS when working as team members, communicating through higher level writing projects, problem-solving when restoring stream beds, and other activities.

The cumulative project is a Senior Service Learning Project, placed in the context of service learning and demonstrating essential skills, to fulfill the Extended Application requirements.

Chalkboard Project

Tillamook School District was chosen as one of three districts in the state to receive a grant from the Oregon Department of Education’s Chalkboard Project; they are in the initial stages of this three-year program. The grant provided initial consultant services with the school district to work with administrators and teachers from every building. The decision was made to use funds to design and implement practices which enhance teacher recruitment and retention, and create innovative teacher career opportunities. The goal is that 100% of the students and 100% of the teachers will at some time be involved with this project.

Through involvement in the project, THS looks forward to impacting students' learning experiences in a positive way by improving teacher quality. Teacher professional development is already being enhanced by "teachers teaching teachers" in their own district as well as in other districts. The staff has already traveled to Pendleton, Eugene, Fossil (and more places) to do trainings. Ed said, "We're building Professional Learning Communities." He continued, "Teachers have chances to be leaders, gain professional experience, earn recognition, and earn stipends."

The Chalkboard Project is also creating opportunities for Tillamook to work with Hampton and Stimson Lumber Mills on joint education programs. "Because of the Chalkboard Project, we have conversations with Hampton and discovered we share the same goals." As a result the industry partners want to be a part of the model. Ed said, "It forced us to build unusual partnerships and conversations with a whole lot of people."

Ultimately, all of the Chalkboard and partnership activities will benefit students. According to Mr. Rhodes, "It is not separate from the rest of the things they are doing. It is not an initiative that has taken us down another street....But it is the drive behind getting good young teachers in the district into the business of teaching and helping them have a meaningful career that gives them some options and choices to keep them energized."



Benefits to THS when high school is "working"

When school is working, students are engaged and motivated to be present and participate. When school is working for kids, teachers and administrators benefit as well. When staff are energized, the focus can go right back to the students. As Mr. Rhodes said, "When there are lots of things going on for kids, my conversations with teachers are about creating and building and what kids are getting out of it, not about setting up an observation for evaluation. And that's much more life-giving than signing a bunch of POs in a day."

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This story was written by Ginny Birky, PhD, from George Fox University as a sabbatical leave project and in partnership with Oregon Department of Education. On January 18, 2008 11 people were interviewed with the overarching question, "What works for kids at Tillamook High School?" Participants included the principal, four teachers, five students, and the grant writer/foundation director from the district office. 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 THS was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school.