



Small Talk

the official newsletter of the
OREGON SMALL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

The Road Less Traveled



By: **Michael Lasher**
OSSA Executive Director

As we approach another graduation, we should look back on some of the major themes of this last year at the state and federal level and look ahead to the challenges

and opportunities that will be coming our way.

Although it doesn't seem in some of our rural areas that the state economy has been improving, overall the employment numbers are up and as a result tax revenues for state operations, including the state school fund are increasing. While we all realize that another economic downturn could wipe out the modest increases in school funding, most districts are adding back programs and services. As we enter the next legislative session, we need to remain vigilant to changes in the funding formula that could have great impact on small districts.

This last year, ODE and OEIB rolled out requests for proposals on a whole pallet of strategic initiatives spawned by the previous two legislative sessions. Much as the charter school movement was envisioned as a catalyst for reforming and invigorating education, strategic initiatives from the state are being used as an incubator for new ideas from teacher mentoring to STEM. Clearly, this trend is going to continue in the coming session.

The federal waiver from No Child Left Behind continues to influence what is important and what is necessary. Teacher evaluation systems, SMARTER Balanced and a host of requirements large and small continue to make life interesting for us all. The 40-40-20 goals and the preceding benchmarks, especially kindergarten readiness, all day kindergarten, and 3rd grade reading, will be the focus of much of the "new money." As I travel around the state, I find more and more educators wanting to "take back"

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First-ever OSSA Administrator of the Year: Michael Carter



The Oregon Small Schools Association is proud to announce Michael Carter as its 2014 Administrator of the Year. This is the first time the OSSA has named an Administrator of the Year.

Carter is superintendent of the Rainier School District, a position he's held since 2003. Prior to that, Carter served as principal at Rainier High School, where he could be seen at nearly every school event supporting students. As a superintendent, he still makes attending student events a priority.

"I'm very honored to receive the award – I'm humbled," Carter said.

Carter is not afraid to set high goals and lead the district in reaching them, including the declaration that 100% of 3rd graders would be at or above grade level in reading by the end of the school year.

Carter's high level of integrity keeps everyone in his district committed to reaching district-wide goals. He has worked with administrators and board members to set a clear vision and objectives for his district.

"We're only as good as our last decision, but together we make better decisions and maximize our resources," Carter said. "We're trying to set the example of how you can maximize resources with creative people and great teamwork. I'm blessed to have such quality people working with me."

Carter's accomplishments include opening Rainier's School-Based Health Center which serves all members of the community, as well as implementing district-wide PLCs to guide instruction. This has promoted engaging and innovated teaching strategies and interventions.

"Small schools are unique," Carter said. "They're indicative of Oregon. It's part of our pioneering spirit. We're willing to take risks and make the most of our resources. The difficult part is that you get to wear all the hats. That's why I tip my hat to all small school administrators because we have to be a jack of all trades. We still have the same accountability as larger districts, so we need to be very creative."

If guiding a school district weren't enough, Carter also teaches graduate courses for Lewis & Clark College, mentoring teachers and fledgling administrators in best practices, classroom management strategies, and using data to improve academic outcomes.

Congratulations to Michael Carter on his accomplishments! Be sure to keep a lookout for when nominations open for the 2015 OSSA Administrator of the Year, as well as the 2014-2015 Teacher of the year.

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Central Linn High School English Department Tries Something New

By: *Jenn Ewing, OSSA 2013-2014 Co-Teacher of the Year*



In our current age of high stakes testing, many schools are failing miserably at attaining those highly coveted good test scores. Central Linn, for the past few years, has had abysmal OAKS test scores in reading and writing. They are not alone. School districts are scrambling, juggling, and managing the best they can. But changes are slow and difficult in a public school setting, and many schools are desperate to

change something for the better, but aren't sure of what to change or how to change it.

Three years ago, with the hire of new superintendent, Brian Gardner, Central Linn decided to make a change to its English department that has helped student reading and writing OAKS scores not only improve, but beat the state average. Superintendent Gardner, upon learning about struggling student test scores in reading and writing, decided to have two teachers, one freshly graduated from Willamette University, and the other a veteran of only two years, redesign the high school English department.

Jenn Ewing and Jan Colley were approached by Superintendent Gardner the summer Jan was hired in 2012. He asked them to level the entire high school population into six levels based on skill levels in reading and writing. So, pouring over 200 names, test scores, and teacher recommendations, Jenn and Jan created six levels to

be taught between the two of them the following fall. Students placed in Levels 1-3 were below a proficient level in reading and/or writing, and Levels 4-6 were proficient, advanced, and College Now classes, respectively. Each level had unique course names such as "Literature of Nature and Survival" and "The American Dream." Students had the ability to move to higher levels once they mastered the standards in the class they were placed in.

What they created turned out to be a lot of work. Each level had distinct curriculum they had to create, and at the semester break, they offered different sections and had to create more unique curriculum. No longer was the canonized 9th grade English curriculum used; Jenn and Jan created new classes each term. The following school year rolled around, and the teacher team set out to create new classes. This time, they decided for sanity's sake to not change classes at the semester, but they still worked hard to create engaging curriculum at each level.

That fall, they found out they were nominated for the OSSA Teacher of the Year – and then they found out that the reading and writing OAKS scores from the previous year had just been reported. Central Linn's passing rate went from 20% passing to 64% passing. Jan and Jenn were grateful, humbled, and relieved. Superintendent Gardner said, "I gave these relatively new teachers a task that any veteran teacher would have loved to have done, but wouldn't have thought it possible. They were new; they didn't know what they could and couldn't do!"

OPINION: Rural school districts already provide free community college

By: *Sen. Mark Hass*

**Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the April 29, 2014, edition of The Oregonian newspaper as a guest opinion piece. It has been reprinted in Small Talk with permission from The Oregonian.*

It's a small town with a feed store and a definite country music feel. But the school board in Gaston understands modern economic realities and the need to prepare their kids for the future.

Gaston has become the latest school district to offer students a fifth year of high school – as a way of giving students "free" college courses. Students will now have the option of "attending" high school for five years while actually taking courses at a community college in the fifth year. The district will continue to collect state school payments as long as the students are still enrolled in high school. This money is what covers college tuition.

Gaston Superintendent David Beasley told me he questioned the ethics of using state K-12 money for college scholarships. But in the end, he concluded it was the "right thing to do for our kids."

Gaston joins a handful of other Oregon school districts – Lebanon, Redmond, Klamath Falls, Jefferson County and Dallas -- that have offered students the chance to delay graduation for a year or two so they can take college courses for free. Those programs will help them become welders, medical assistants or get a head-start on a bachelor's degree.

The cost – about \$5,000 per student per year – is paid by Oregon taxpayers.

It's striking that the school districts that have turned to this progressive college-for-free option are located in rural parts of our state. These are communities where past generations never needed college – they walked out of high school on graduation day and into the nearest timber mill.

Those days are gone.

Today's economic realities offer few paths to the middle class without some post-secondary education or training.

The Oregon Youth Council reports the average taxpayer cost for a young person between the ages of 18 and 24 without a job is approximately \$14,000 per year in social services.

In other words, not going to college is getting pretty expensive too.

But while these districts are doing the right thing for kids in their communities, a far more efficient approach is a statewide solution for all high school graduates.

The biggest concern is this: students at Gaston and other schools doing the five or six year extended high school are not eligible for

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Secrets to implementing individualized instruction

By: *Jan Colley, OSSA 2013-2014 Co-Teacher of the Year*

U.S. federal Pell Grant funds. You must be a high school graduate to qualify for those benefits. It's likely that 40-50 percent would qualify. That means Oregon taxpayers are picking up the entire tab.

And if every one of Oregon's 198 school districts made the same move as Gaston, it would take a monstrous bite out of the K-12 budget. Imagine if Portland rolled out an extra year or two of college courses for its 47,000 students.

A better plan is the one the state is studying now as a result of legislation passed in the February legislative session. It would fund two years of community college for high school graduates and take advantage of every dime of available federal money.

Still, I don't fault Gaston. This is their best tool to launch kids toward a brighter future. But the same opportunity should exist for everyone. My hope is the 2015 Legislature will pass this statewide solution so that all of Oregon's sons and daughters are moving forward together.

Democrat Mark Hass, of Beaverton, represents the 14th District in the Oregon Senate.



I'll never forget standing in front of 36 freshmen, four of whom didn't mind being there, half the class being ESL students, and six students with IEPs. What was running through my head? *Differentiate Jan,*

differentiate! How the heck was I suppose to do that when I could only make eye contact with 4 of the students? I was frightened. What had I gotten myself into? The idea of individualizing education and meeting each student at his or her level seemed ideal and splendid during graduate classes; however, in an actual classroom it seemed impossible. I had to make the decision right then and there: Do I believe in this idea? I didn't want to give up – I don't give up. I still believed in this idea, and I was determined to figure out how to do it. So, I began to focus my research on how to motivate, encourage, and inspire students.

Through my research and early moments of teaching, I developed my philosophy further. Every student, no matter what skill level, learning level, natural level, maturity level, needs to be motivated to learn. But, there is some groundwork that you must first lay. I absolutely love teaching my students how exciting literature can be, and how enjoyable it can be to write, but my purpose as a teacher – what keeps me working when I'm absolutely

about to break – is knowing that my students feel like they matter. This I believe to be the root of a great receptive mind of learning. This is the moment when students really absorb knowledge. When they trust you, they work for you; they're ready to be challenged and to *learn*. Taking the time to let your students understand that you care about them – genuinely care – will take less time than forcing them to do your lessons. In these lovely moments where they trust you, are challenged, and interests are peaked, students are like little sponges. You have their

attention. This was a great breakthrough. I had success in implementing it, but I needed an environment that would help this idea blossom.

In my interview with Central Linn, they seemed to not only have the same end goal as I – To individualize instruction for all students and to find a way to make it interesting for them – but they were actually making steps to make this happen. They weren't just using the word "differentiate" they were applying it. The administration wasn't afraid to try something new, and crazy, and fantastic for the betterment of their students.

Working at CLHS, I have learned that we can't just say we want to change things. We can't just complain about lack of motivation or respect or intelligence. We have to develop ways to make these cogs and wheels move in a productive fashion. We have to be bold – of course we have to do our research and work a few extra hours – and we have to believe in what we are doing. Then, maybe our students will see how much we believe in them – in their potential and ability to be amazing, self-thinking, dream grabbing individuals. How can we expect anything to happen if we just wait for that motivation to naturally spring from our students? How can we expect things to change if we have ideas but no implementation? When talking about implementing individualized mass customized learning with Jon Zwemke, Central Linn's principal, he said "We'll be the outcast or the hero." This shows me he believes in this and is willing to try something courageous for our students, giving them a better chance, not only in education, but also in life. There is a lot more to do, but CLHS is on their way.

If there are any secrets to implementing individualized instruction, I'd say you have to instill trust and respect, have colleagues that believe and are passionate for their students learning, communicate effectively with colleagues and to be courageous. It's been such a rewarding experience to see my students improve and grow through the application, if only the very beginnings, of individualized mass customized learning. Looking back at my first experience, with those 36 completely different little cherubs, to where I am now, gives me great hope in the changes we're making, but more importantly, it gives me great hope for our student's futures.



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Rural schools increasingly diverse, low-income

**Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the May 19, 2014, edition of Education Week, and was written by Jackie Mader.*

The nation's rural schools are growing in enrollment and serving increasing numbers of low-income, minority, and special education students, according to a new report released in May.

"Why Rural Matters," the seventh biennial report by the Rural School and Community Trust, examined education, socioeconomic factors, funding, and policy data from each state during the 2010-11 school year.

Nationwide, enrollment in rural schools is growing faster than in non-rural districts, which the report notes has been a consistent trend for years. More than 20 percent of children in the country are enrolled in rural schools, and nearly one-third of all public schools are classified as rural, although percentages vary greatly by state. In Montana, more than 75 percent of all schools are rural, compared to less than 7 percent in Massachusetts.

Between the 2008-09 and 2010-11 school years, the percentage of rural students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch increased by five percentage points to about 47 percent. During that time, the percentage of rural minority students also increased slightly, from about 26 percent to nearly 27 percent.

Daniel Showalter, one of the report's researchers, said what's most notable about the increasing enrollment is that minority students account for nearly 93 percent of the total new rural student population. "The white rural population is basically remaining stable," Showalter said. "But the minority population is rapidly expanding."

The authors of the report concluded that these numbers make it even more important for policymakers to pay attention to rural schools and their populations, as well as "what those challenges mean to state and national goals of improving achievement and narrowing achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups."

Robert Mahaffey, the spokesman for the Rural School and Community Trust, said it's also important to examine funding formulas,

resources, and teacher development as rural schools serve more diverse and low-income students. "When we focus on resources for rural places, we don't just talk about money," Mahaffey said. "We talk about professional development supports...mentoring for teachers. There's a human capital piece of this as well."

As in previous years, the report ranked states on a "rural education priority" scale. Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Arizona were the top five priority states this year, which the report's authors define as the states that have the greatest need "for policymakers to address rural education issues." The report also offers a wealth of state-by-state data on rural student demographics, spending, and educational outcomes, as well as a new brief section on early-childhood education in rural areas.

Other data from the report:

- The amount of rural per-pupil funding has increased since the last report, from about \$5,600 to more than \$5,800.
- About 3 percent of rural students are English-language learners and 13 percent qualify for special education.
- More than two in five rural students live in poverty and one in eight has changed residence in the previous year.

Table 1. National Rural Statistics

Importance Gauge		Educational Policy Context Gauge	
Percent rural schools	32.9%	Rural instructional expenditures per pupil	\$5,826
Percent small rural districts	49.9%	Ratio of instructional to transportation expenditures	\$11.71
Percent rural students	20.4%	Median organizational scale (divided by 100)	3,531
Number of rural students (median = 141,632)	9,765,385	Ratio of state revenue to local revenue	\$1.17
Percent state education funds to rural districts	22.9%	Salary expenditures per instructional FTE	\$57,791
Student and Family Diversity Gauge		Educational Outcomes Gauge	
Percent rural minority students	26.7%	Rural Grade 4 NAEP scores (math)	242.87
Number of rural minority students (median = 23,176)	2,611,30	Rural Grade 4 NAEP scores (reading)	223.22
Percent rural ELL students	4	Rural Grade 8 NAEP scores (math)	286.01
Percent rural IEP students	3.1%	Rural Grade 8 NAEP scores (reading)	267.13
Percent rural mobility	12.8%		
	11.6%		
Socioeconomic Challenges Gauge			
Percent rural adults with high school diploma	85.4%		
Rural adult unemployment rate	6.6%		
Rural median household income	\$57,987		
Percent rural students who are Title I eligible	19.3%		
Percent rural students eligible for subsidized meals	46.6%		

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the conversation about what makes a good education. I hope we'll see those feeling grow to become a groundswell.

Looking ahead to the next legislative session, the Oregon Small Schools Association board of directors will craft a legislative platform

that aligns with our education partners but also amplifies the needs of small districts. As you have ideas or suggestions please do not hesitate to contact our board or myself. We would be happy to have your input.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't recognize our first recipient of the OSSA first annual

Administrator of the Year Award – Michael Carter, Superintendent of Rainier School District. Michael will be honored at the COSA, Seaside conference in June.

Congratulations on another year.