Small Schools Are a Hopeful Force to be Reckoned With

By: Amanda O’Brien, OSSA 2017 Administrator of the Year

When I think about the role and responsibilities of administrators, I’m reminded of one particular Disneyland ride. My family made our first trip to Anaheim this summer where we took a ride on the Star Tours, Star Wars ride. It was amazing – we zipped, flew, dodged, plunged, fought and found success on this exhausting, exhilarating adventure. At certain points of the ride, we found ourselves panicking. At other times, we were yelling. I even found myself laughing in a self-soothing, ‘I have so much adrenaline right now’ kind of way. For the entirety of the ride, though, we knew we were going to be okay. We knew that our mission would have its ups, downs, challenges and successes.

During each ride, one person in the audience is chosen as The Rebel Spy. The person the droid chose during our ride happened to be my fiery, 9-year-old daughter (a perfect fit by the way). So, what does this mean? It means that within the four-minute experience, all eyes were on her to lead an alliance. For

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The Road Less Traveled

By: Michael Lasher
OSSA Executive Director

Small school districts are unique. The types of issues a small district faces are often far removed from the reality of our larger cousins in the city. The Oregon Small Schools Association was created to meet the needs of Oregon’s small districts, including their superintendents. With that in mind, this year OSSA is unveiling our Superintendent Mentor Program as a resource for every member superintendent.

The original idea for this program grew out of the realization that often times new small district superintendents need someone they can talk to about an issue, impending crisis or a problematic past practice. How touchy issues are handled in a small district usually require a degree of finesse and concern for the local politics big districts can overlook. As much as we all appreciate policies and the law, rolling out changes to “how we’ve always done it ‘round here” can be challenging.

As the OSSA Board thought about it further, it became obvious that no one knows everything about everything, therefore we could all use an updated list of mentors and experts on small schools to ask questions of and bounce ideas off. This is really a service from which all superintendents could benefit.

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Who better to ask than a fellow superintendent about her experience with budgeting in a declining enrollment district? Who better to ask than a colleague about how he might have handled a transportation issue with a disabled student and a litigious parent?

Who has experience running a bond? Well, five of our small school mentors have gone through the bond process. Many of them can provide advice and opinions on how to be successful in asking the community to raise their own taxes. We have 10 mentors who have volunteered to answer your questions about how to have better board relations, which might also include reigning in that rogue board member we all get from time to time.

Best of all, you can choose who you call. If you’d like to keep an issue quiet in your region, talk to someone from the other side of the state. One thing we do ask -- thank those who have offered their service to others. Giving back is part of being an administrator, but giving back is so much more gratifying when others show appreciation for our gifts of time, talent and experience.

The OSSA board hopes you will try the Superintendent Mentor Program. If you would like to share your experience by registering as a mentor, contact Edie Allstott, OSSA board secretary, at 541-966-3106 or edie.allstott@imesd.k12.or.us

This is shaping up to be a great year for OSSA. We hope it is for you, too.

those of you who are not Star Wars fans, the Alliance is a group of resilient, tolerant, diverse fighters seeking a better future. The audience would work together as a team with The Rebel Spy leading the way; their hard work, perseverance and hope would carry them. How is the Alliance any different from an administrator in a small, rural school? It isn’t.

I began my administrative career here at Central Linn six years ago. Just a few short weeks after I was hired, I was notified that the school I would be leading was rated low enough to be labeled a Focus School. There are only two schools in Central Linn (K-6 and 7-12) and mine was in the bottom 15% in the state. I didn’t really know what to expect and how it would impact my role, but I knew that I’d need to work that much harder. I would need to form an alliance and identify who would fight with me. This sounds much easier than it was. In my case, I was the sixth principal in five years and teachers operated independently as a result; a little ‘Rogue One’ if you will. But I was hopeful. It took a few years of working with the staff and trusting in each other to build a sense of respect and comradery.

As a Focus School, I also knew that we would need to connect with available resources to educate ourselves to raise achievement. I worked with other rural schools and The Rural School Network to share ideas and strategies. Our ‘Obi-Wan Kenobi’ was our appointed Focus School coach, who for five years shared her wisdom. Coach Kathy would come and go, supporting our ideas, facilitating Alliance members’ questions and reminding us that our dedication and hopeful attitude is what drives our success. And we didn’t give up. So many other schools who were identified in the fall of 2012 no longer have the same leaders they started with. I believed in the future of our school and have been a consistent force. This would seem to be an important factor that Central Linn Elementary School has been so successful.

Turnover in a small school is an enemy we face. Often, we are a stepping stone for staff to work in larger districts. Sometimes we lose teachers to The Death Star with its shiny new armor and more up-to-date weapons for daily battle. But, what we have as a small community is hope. We are close knit and make shared decisions. We are a united front. We are destined for great things. We are proud of our accomplishments and our growth. With all the mobility of staff in rural schools, administrators struggle to keep the right teachers in the right seats of the bus. I feel like I have all my staff on the right seat of the spaceship.

With all the adversity administrators face in a small school, we can make it and have the ability to conquer. We zip, fly, dodge and plunge. We seek growth and challenge ourselves. Together, we fight every day. We continue to hope. The force is with all of us!
If you are an elementary teacher you can relate to the anticipation of receiving your list of students for the year. We experience a myriad of emotions: excitement, slight feelings of inadequacy, enthusiasm and exhilaration. When I was a new teacher, I would immediately focus on the number of students on my list with a little trepidation. Now, with 22 years of teaching experience, that number looks much different and a little larger. Hidden within that list of 25 students are two or more parents per student, siblings, grandparents, caregivers, etc.; my list of 25 students quickly expands to the 125+ lives I will have an opportunity to inspire, love, educate, support and communicate with. These are our students’ “people.” For our students to be successful we need to establish genuine relationships with them and those who support them. So, how do we do this?

Reach Out to Families

It is essential that we make the first move in building relationships with families. The sooner we do it, the better! Often families don’t know how to approach us. We must break down that wall by being positive and inviting. Frequent face-to-face conversations, phone calls, newsletters and letters home are powerful practices in helping families feel welcome and included in their child’s education. Taking the time to contact families early in the school year with affirmation and a willingness to answer any questions or clear up any confusion will pay off enormously, especially when we will undoubtedly need to contact some of them later in the year with concerns. When students know we are communicating regularly with their families and they witness a positive family-teacher partnership they are more likely to trust us, tend to misbehave less and generally try harder.

Listen to Families

Families are experts when it comes to their child. We need to listen to them. When families feel that we value their opinions and respect the knowledge they have of their child, they are more willing to listen and value our opinion as well. It is vital that families know we desire to work with them to resolve issues. When we are struggling with a student, we need to meet with the child’s family to ask if they are observing similar behaviors at home. Often in those conversations, we learn valuable information about the child, their family and situations each may be dealing with. It is a perfect opportunity for us to offer encouragement, support and compassion for not only the child but the family as well. This collaboration deepens those budding relationships. It reinforces the idea that we, as a teacher-family team, truly care for the child and that we both are working for his or her success.

Provide Opportunities for Family Participation

Families often want to be involved in their child’s education, but don’t know how. Some of these uncertainties may stem from their own negative educational experiences. Providing opportunities for families to engage in their child’s education is important in strengthening the home-to-school connection. Our school offers a variety of programs for involvement: Meet the Teacher, Back to School Week, Grandparents’ Day, conferences, invitations to monthly assemblies, workshops, etc. These help encourage families to get through the doors of our building. When it comes to volunteering, we need to be conscious that each family has individual strengths/abilities that they can offer. Providing a variety of large and small ways families can help opens the door for involvement regardless of personal situations. When families are able to use their skill set, they will be more willing to help. Celebrate and thank families for even the smallest of participation. Hopefully, they will gain the confidence to participate again - a win for our students and our school!

Helping families feel welcome, listened to, valued and supported increases the chances that they will, in turn, welcome, listen, value and support us. As teachers, we need to reach out to families, listen to families and provide opportunities for families to participate with the hopes of producing powerful, reciprocal relationships that will ultimately lead to greater success for our students. Teaching is hard work, but overwhelmingly worth it when we know we can affect the lives of our students and their families. Small districts afford us unique opportunities to make our students’ people our people as well.
It is hard to believe that another year is underway throughout the many school districts in Oregon. The excitement level is extremely high with wonderful anticipation for what will be accomplished this academic year. We all look forward to witnessing firsthand the wonders the academic year will bring to our students, faculty and the various communities we serve.

The French scientist Louis Pasteur once wrote, “When I approach a child, he inspires me in two sentiments: tenderness for what he is and respect for what he may become.” As educators, these words are timeless. The faculty and staff of the Rainier School District are very excited about the future of the students we educate. Each and every child who enters our school buildings is special and extremely valued. Every student will discover new and exciting things this year and grow in so many areas. This process is what brings the joy of teaching to each and every staff member and administrator working in the Oregon school system.

For a brief moment, think back to a time when you first “discovered” something on your very own. Perhaps it was when you first discovered an object could float in water or the time when the multiplication table that you struggled with so very long finally clicked and you “discovered” the reason behind it. Suddenly the solution became clear and it all made sense. Whatever the occasion was for you, remember that time and remember how you felt -- there was a joy and an exhilaration in that special discovery, and your mind expanded with new knowledge and understanding. That discovery made all the difference to you, and what was once incomprehensible suddenly became clear and new meaning was added to your life. The joy of learning and discovery is what school is all about.

We know each child learns differently, utilizing his or her own style and method. We provide the opportunity for new discovery and for students to reach their true potential. As educators, we offer new avenues of knowledge that may well lead students to “discover” a new aspect of understanding and knowledge. This is an opportunity that should not be wasted. As educators, we should encourage every student to achieve more and to constantly be open to discovery.

Human beings are unique from all other animals because of our thinking ability. Of all the powers that we possess, the ability to reason and to think affords the opportunity to improve and better ourselves. School is all about providing the pathway to discover new and wonderful things! This year will be a banner year for all small school districts in Oregon.

With open minds that are hungry for new ideas, let us begin our important educational partnership and continue our journey of discovery.

As your OSSA President, it is my privilege and honor to serve you. If you need anything please contact your regional OSSA board member, Director Michael Lasher or myself at 503-556-3777 X 264. We have a cadre of veteran administrators willing and able to provide mentorship and support for members, so I encourage you to reach out for support when an issue arises in your leadership assignment. We know that when we work together and support each other we are all more effective. I wish each of you a most excellent school year full of success and new discoveries.

Join us!
Oregon Small Schools Association Breakfast
During the OSBA Convention
Saturday, Nov. 11, 2017 • 7:30 a.m.
Mt. Hood Room
Portland Marriott Downtown Waterfront Hotel

We are Here to Discover
By: Michael Carter, Superintendent, Rainier School District & OSSA Board President
What the Recent Legislative Session Means for Small Schools

By: Justin Martin, OSSA Lobbyist

The 79th Oregon Legislative Session ran for 157 calendar days and ended on July 7, 2017. During the session 784 bills were passed. OSSA asked our lobbyist, Justin Martin, to explain how some of these bills affect small schools.

From Justin:

First of all, the Oregon Legislature once again realized the importance of providing for Oregon’s smallest schools through passage of the dorm school sunset extension. We have constantly been able to educate elected officials to the unique needs and circumstances that our extremely rural schools face. The recognition of the value that our small schools add to not only the district, but the community and the state as a whole is an important part of the entire K-12 education system. We have been very successful over the years in continuing these vital programs, which also include the small high school grant.

Second, while the dorm school time period was extended late in the legislative session, it was only for one year instead of the normal two-year extension that we have received in prior legislative sessions. This means that we will have to work quickly to look at solutions either in the 2018 short session or very early in the 2019 session, so our districts have the ability to plan around those dollars being there for their budgeting purposes.

Finally, we also have to start thinking about the sunset of the small high school grant again in our legislative priorities and planning for upcoming sessions. This grant will sunset in 2020, so we will definitely need to address it in the 2019 session, to again give our districts the opportunity to have some certainty around their budgeting processes.

In terms of government relations and what we are working on during the interim, we will be focused on:

- Gathering information from legislators and their staff from this past session re: our legislative agenda (funding, dorms, small high school grant and other issues)
- Starting a dialogue regarding the timeframe for both the dorm legislation and the small high school grant
- Reaching out to potential legislators to sponsor and support the necessary legislation according to those timeframes
- Reading out to legislative leadership both on the majority and minority sides with our legislative intent

OSSA Board Members:

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The National FFA (Future Farmers of America) Association is the student leadership organization associated with Agricultural Education. As many FFA members can recite, “the FFA is a national organization that reaches from the state of Alaska to Puerto Rico and from the state of Maine to Hawaii.” That’s exactly where I found myself working this summer, the Island of Oahu, Hawaii.

I was one of two educators selected by the National FFA Organization to attend the Hawaii Agriculture Conference as a facilitator. My mission was to inspire Hawaii FFA members to find their passion for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through Agricultural Education and FFA.

Those who are familiar with FFA know how different programs can be from school to school. In Agricultural Education, students are required to develop a Supervised Agricultural Experience project (SAE). SAE projects range dramatically and include all facets of the agriculture industry. For students, especially those who didn’t grow up on a conventional American farm, this can be difficult to understand.

In order to help Hawaii agriculture students find inspiration for their future SAE projects, I began doing some research. I had been to Hawaii a few times on vacation, and as an agriculture teacher, I had taken part in many farm tours on my vacations. I love learning about the diverse agricultural practices around the world and feel these tours give me a better understanding of the local culture. This trip, however, was totally different in expanding my own knowledge of agriculture on the islands. This conference hosted a wide range of individuals involved in the Hawaiian agriculture industry. There were educators, high school and college students and a wide range of industry leaders specializing in everything from indigenous growing practices to biotechnology.

I learned that approximately 40 percent of land on Hawaii is farmland. The state is home to approximately 3,600 crop farms and 1,100 livestock farms that include cattle, hogs, milk, eggs and honey. While Hawaii is much more diverse than I realized, I also learned that the islands currently import 80 percent of the food consumed. I also began to realize that very few of the students at the conference grew up on a farm. This is where we as FFA Advisors often lose students. It’s a common misconception that FFA is only for the “traditional farm kids”; while FFA is rooted in agriculture, it spans so much wider.

As I got to know the students and their teachers at the conference, we began to brainstorm non-traditional opportunities in FFA. What I found was that many of these students are working on some pretty amazing things. Some are operating drones for agriculture and natural resources monitoring, others are working on protecting the ecosystem in Hawaii by leading conservation efforts and many of them are building their communities through service projects. What they needed from me was help articulating their projects in FFA terms. Throughout the conference, we tackled this challenge and allowed the students to identify where they fit in within the National FFA organization.

As I reflect on my experience in Hawaii, I couldn’t help but make connections to my home state. Here in Oregon, students are doing amazing things beyond the classroom walls. I encourage you to help these students take their projects to the next level by coaching them on scholarship applications, providing them recognition through project awards and guiding them in their own business plans. There is nothing more rewarding than helping a student make his or her dreams become a reality, and we get that opportunity in our classrooms every day.
A middle school in eastern Oregon recently received a $100,000 Fitness Center on its campus. Weston Middle School, part of the Athena-Weston School District, was recently selected by the National Foundation for Governors’ Fitness Councils (NFGFC) Don’t Quit campaign to receive the $100,000 gift. The middle school is one of three Oregon schools selected.

Ann Vescio, principal of Weston Middle School, said the center is a wonderful addition to the school, entire school district and the two communities of Weston and Athena. “We are so pleased that our school was chosen and that we can benefit for so many years in the future from this opportunity,” Vescio said.

According to Vescio, the fitness center will be used as part of the middle school’s Physical Education program and allow the school to offer an age-appropriate, after-school weight lifting activity for middle school students. In addition, Weston Middle School hopes to work with the City of Weston to open the facility in the future to community members, said Vescio.

Three Weston Middle School students worked with Vescio to produce the video used for the application, which proved instrumental in winning the center. Jake Steinfeld, chairman of the NFGFC, congratulated the entire school on producing the video, which out of 220 applications was one of three chosen in Oregon. “You guys are really stars. Remember you can do anything in life as long as you have a dream and go for it,” Steinfeld said.

The school officially opened the center with a ribbon cutting on the morning of September 20. The entire student body gathered in the auditorium, along with special community guests and representatives from NFGFC.

In a press release, Oregon Governor Kate Brown congratulated all three Oregon schools that were selected. “It’s no secret that when healthy eating and exercise are introduced during adolescence, young people continue to make those good decisions throughout their lives. I thank the NFGFC for helping these three middle schools promote active lifestyles in young Oregonians,” Brown said.

Since 2012, NFGFC has delivered fitness centers in 18 states and Washington, D.C. The foundation’s goal is to place fitness centers in all 50 states. For more information about the NFGFC, visit www.natgovfit.org. Each fitness center is financed through public/private partnerships and does not rely on taxpayer dollars or state funding.
Several Oregon teachers from Douglas County were able to engage in some unique professional development this past summer. A total of 16 educators embarked on self-designed summer professional development experiences as the Douglas County’s 2017 Fund for Teachers grantees. The skills and knowledge gained through their experiences will enhance their classrooms and their careers.

The Ford Family Foundation partnered with Fund for Teachers, a national nonprofit, to provide funding for the grant recipients. The self-designed learning experiences were as varied as the winners. Nine teachers attended Conscious Discipline Summer Institutes, while two teachers explored Iceland’s geologic landscapes and natural resources. One teacher from Days Creek Charter School investigated the effect of the 1800s westward expansion on Native American tribes, two others did field research in Costa Rica and two more participated in a Rocky Mountain workshop in Colorado.

“The partnership is a part of our efforts to ensure rural Oregon youth have access to high quality education programs both in and out of school,” said Anne Kubisch, president of The Ford Family Foundation. “Enhancing teacher quality through the support of professional development is a core component of the effort.”

Grant awards range from up to $5,000 for individuals and up to $10,000 for teams.

Fund for Teachers awarded $2.1 million to 546 preK-12 grade teachers across the country this year. The 2018 grant applications are now open. For more information, visit www.fundforteachers.org.