

Where Are We? A good place . . . and getting better!

By Dr. Kenneth Cox, Vernonia School District Superintendent

"Where are we as a school district?" I've been asked that question a lot recently – and I'm happy to answer it.

"We are in a good place and getting better!" is my answer. Why am I so optimistic? Because of the people I work with and the differences they make in the lives of our children.

The Vernonia School Board is focused on learning. They concentrate on actions that really make a difference, like establishing a culture of communication, effective relationships, and recognizing staff for their countless hours for kids. None of our board members have a "personal agenda." They are committed to working together to establish a better future for the community.

We have excellent staff at every level. They not only interact with your children and grandchildren every day as teachers, aides and secretaries, but many spend their evenings and early mornings making sure we have clean and safe buildings. We have three ladies in our kitchen who provide two meals a day for any student who wants it. Many a time I've seen teachers heading home from school an hour or two after "quitting time," having spent their own time away from their families preparing for the next day.

We have a strong staff development program directed by Mr. McClain, the Vernonia Middle School (VMS) principal and Curriculum Director. He and members of the District Curriculum Committee have crafted a solid plan of professional development, providing the tools and skills our teachers need to help students succeed. Last year we spent time examining the more than 2,500 Oregon State Standards in Mathematics, English, Language Arts, Science, Foreign Language, Health, and PE to determine which are most important for Vernonia students to be successful. This core set of standards are called the Power Standards; our staff are using them to focus their teaching to better help students.

Our district Website is becoming more interactive. All our teachers have their own web pages. Some of you may have already accessed some of these student assignments and class schedules. We plan to have student progress reports and grades available to parents online (through a secure access code) if not by the end of this year, then early next year.

Our high school students have been given access to their own email accounts which they can access from home to submit homework and communicate with their teachers and fellow students. This option will also be available to middle school teachers, after some initial training, if they have specific projects for students.

The Vernonia District has led the way in adopting two new technologies with the help of the NW Regional ESD. We encouraged them to obtain a new, automated, online library system that we piloted for them last year and is currently being used by many surrounding districts. You can even check out what books we have in our libraries from home! We also installed a new Linux based, thin client computer lab at Washington Grade School this year. We are piloting this system with guidance from the ESD in using software that helps students learn how use the mouse, to type and to navigate through different software choices and the Internet (under teacher supervision). Our success in this area is largely due to the efforts of staff. In this case, our District Technology Coordinator, Glenda DeLemos, has spent many hours getting the WGS lab ready for students to use and collaborating with teachers to prepare computer activities for students each week.

We recently had a grant renewed for our district-wide after school program that has been so successful it is being used as a model for other districts. This program is coordinated by Mr. Miller, Washington Grade School (WGS) principal who also introduced the Positive Behavior System (PBS) to WGS last year. The PBS program has dramatically reduced student discipline problems. Its success is spreading to VMS where staff members are being trained to continue the program there.

Vernonia High School (VHS) is also making a difference. Under the leadership of Principal Underwood, staff is improving student-staff relationships and establishing a safer learning environment. Mr. Underwood and his staff are vigilant in addressing any and all student concerns for safety. He recently organized two visits from canine police officers who checked school lockers for illegal drugs. Students are also getting involved in making our schools safer and drug-free. A number of middle and high school leadership students have participated in the last two Vernonia Community Anti-Drug Coalition meetings as they have begun to prepare for a community presentation on Nov. 15th at the Scout Cabin. These activities emphasize the district's continued efforts to help students 'Say No' to drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

Where are we as a district? We are in a good place that is getting better -- thanks to you and to your children; thanks to the many businesses, agencies and community groups that provide volunteer and financial support our schools; and thanks to the faculty and staff of the Vernonia School District.

NOVEMBER EVENTS AND REMINDERS...

- No School on Friday, November 2nd for teacher work day.
- Monday, November 5, 2007 there will be a Title I parent meeting held at the WGS Library from 6:30 to 7:30 pm. This is an informational and parent input meeting about the Title I reading program for all parents of students currently enrolled in the program. Attendance is greatly appreciated.
- Parent /Teacher Conferences at MGS and WGS on November 7th and 8th from 3-8 pm.
- November 5th through the 12th is WGS Book Fair at the WGS Library.
- No School on Friday, November 9 and Monday, November 12 for Veteran's Day.
- P.T.A. Fall Fundraiser begins November 19, 2007.
- No School November 22 -23 for Thanksgiving break.

School Board Meeting Notes

Staff Article

The 47J District School Board Meeting held on October 11, 2007 unanimously approved the use of Capital Reserve Funds to pay for the WGS sprinkler system upgrade in the amount of \$13,500. The upgrade will allow the district to remove any Fire Marshal restrictions for the use of the basement, but will also improve the fire safety for the entire building. Board members reviewed and unanimously approved budget adjustment resolution #07-07 which resulted in a \$87 difference in the actual budget amount. The board also unanimously approved the Superintendent Evaluation Goals for the 2007-08 school year. The evaluation covers performance reviews in communication, leadership, personnel management, board relations, and asset management.

Cathy Ward presented the board with cost estimates for a senior trip to Knottsberry Farm, accommodations at Best Western and food at Medieval Times Restaurant. The seniors and their chaperones can include either Grad Night at Disneyland for an additional \$55, or Blastoff for an additional \$88. Cathy recommended that information be sent out to seniors and their parents for a meeting to discuss the trip and fund raising options. The board unanimously approved the senior trip plans as long as they are in compliance with District Policy for out-of-state travel which includes overnight stays. Dr. Cox will be reviewing the policy and report back to the board members.

Students from VMS reported to the board that there will be a Fall Festival Masquerade Dance on October 26, 2007 from 4- 6:30 pm. The cost to students is \$4 per ticket. The VMS volleyball team is doing well, winning all but one of their games this season and the football team is also doing well with a 2-2 win/loss record. Next month the students will be involved in a canned food drive. VHS Student Body President reported that next week is Homecoming and everyone has been busy planning those activities. He also reported the week after Homecoming is Red Ribbon week for Drug free pledges.

Information was provided about a new service called List Serve. List Serve is an email service available to all patrons of the district. List Serve will be used in conjunction with the district website to promote traffic to the website in order to notify community members and parents of meetings and events. Special interest groups will be able to use the service to exchange ideas and discuss issues. Any documents that can be produced electronically can be sent to the List Serve and then be automatically sent to subscribers in the form of an email. The district will also use List Serve to report any last minute school closures and announcements. Subscribers can receive these email notifications at home or work. The district and each school will have their own lists. It will be possible to subscribe to one or more lists. Students can also subscribe using their personal email address.

Dr. Cox reported that he will be requesting a refund of the Conditional Use Permit Fee that was paid to the city for the proposed wrestling building. The StEP committee's community survey is now ready and will be distributed by members as well as some random mailings. The committee hopes to have all surveys in by the end of the month.

The Columbia County Health Department will also be conducting a Pandemic Flu Exercise at the Vernonia Middle School on November 13, 2007. The exercise will provide 400 doses of flu vaccination to be given away free between 3:30 and 7:30 pm.

The next School Board Meeting is scheduled for November 08, 2007 at 6:00 pm at the District Office.