MHS makes epic moves to help students rescue failing grades

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Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL) has brought a litany of challenges to the way school is facilitated in 2020, with one of the main difficulties being poor grades.

In the beginning of November, it was estimated that nearly half of the nearly 13,000 high schoolers in Salem-Keizer Public Schools (SKPS) were failing at least one class.

"We had a very short window to train our staff on these new platforms, and they did the best that they could. The kids did the very best they could to figure it out, but sometimes the reality is that you have to walk through some adversity in order to figure things out," said Erik Jespersen, the principal at McNary High School.

However, thanks to an aggressive approach to safe, in-person learning, McNary has been able to cut their failing grades from 38% to 17% in the last month.

Over a two-day period (Nov. 9-10) McNary hosted a total of 300 students in 56 cohorts for in-person instruction. Jespersen believes that those two days played a huge role in helping students turn their grades around.

"The vast majority of the kids just needed help with organization and accountability as well as a little social-emotional support. By-and-large, the kids got the support they needed in that face-to-face contact just because they had a trusted adult working with them for a little bit of time. That was our secret to success," Jespersen said. "It was a tremendous effort to have as much outreach as we could, with the primary focus being on building and maintaining relationships with kids more than anything else."

McNary has been doing limited in-person instruction since the beginning of the school year, but they were restricted to just 200-250 students for the week, with teachers working with small groups of less than 10 by appointment only. When in-person instruction restrictions began to loosen late last month, Jespersen wanted to have a larger influx of students learning in-person.

"As the state allowed the districts to be more flexible with bringing in kids, we jumped on that train immediately because we already had all the systems and safety protocols in place," Jespersen said. "We had the mentality that we wanted to have as many kids in our building as we safely could."

Students that were struggling in classes or didn't have the technology needed to access their curriculum were the ones encouraged to attend limited in-person instruction. Special Education (SPED) and English Language Development (ELD) students, along with students on an Individualized Learning Plan (IEP) have also been in the building.

"We have always been very strategic with which students we brought in," Jespersen said.

Kids were only allowed to be in the building for a maximum of two hours, mostly working with teachers and instructional assistants — students with an IEP were able to meet with their case managers. A total of 57 staff members were assisting students in-person during the two-day period.

"They weren't going from one teacher to the next teacher. They were to go in, work with a particular teacher, and then go back out. So that's how we were able to have that volume of kids and maintain all the safety protocols," Jespersen said.

McNary ended up seeing results from their approach almost immediately, which is a credit to the resiliency of the kids at the school according to Jespersen.

"It's resilience on the part of our kids and our teachers and staff. We deliver a constant message that is coming from me and our leadership team that we're not giving up on our kids and we're going to do everything we can to support them," Jespersen said.

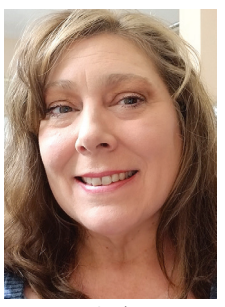
Jespersen also commented on how the culture at the school over the years has helped prepare McNary students for trying times.

"We have worked hard the last several years at McNary building a culture where we strive to be world class. It's something we talk about all the time with our students and our staff. I truly believe that some of the work we have done over the last several years is coming to fruition in this time of crisis," Jespersen said. "I believe that our kids know how much we care about them and I do believe that when you have that trust in the adults you work with, you're going to do whatever it takes to be successful."

Due to the two-week freeze initiated by Gov. Kate Brown, McNary will have to scale back in-person learning significantly — only 30 to 40 students will be allowed in the building over the course of the week. Instructional assistants will still be meeting one-on-one with select students in-person or over Zoom. While McNary is being responsive to their current reality, Jespersen is hoping the freeze will end as soon as possible.

"I'm hopeful that the freeze will end soon and that we will be back to where we were before because it was helping us," Jespersen said. "It's the balance of bringing in kids safely, having staff working with kids safely and also making sure we're getting as much face time as we can, because we know it works."

Keizer food bank will get $1K from Maps CU


P. Tischer

In honor of their service to the Mid-Willamette Valley this year, 10 Maps Credit Union members have been selected to receive the first ever Maps Community Awards from the Maps Community Foundation.

Keizerite Patti Tischer was one of the lucky members selected and $1,000 will be donated to the Keizer Community Food Bank in her name.

"I believe that everyone can make some difference in their community. I enjoy giving back to my community and try to make a difference for others," Tischer said. Tischer is also the current president of the Greater Gubser Neighborhood Association.

The Foundation will donate a total of $10,000 to 10 nonprofits.

"In a challenging year, we wanted to lift up our community and celebrate the ways our Maps members have been helping in response to the pandemic and wildfires," said foundation executive director Kim Hanson.

The winners, nominated by the community and selected by Maps staff, exemplify many of the ways local residents have helped one another in 2020 a year when a pandemic and then wildfires challenged the region and state.

Maps Community Foundation is the philanthropic arm of Maps Credit Union, a member-owned financial cooperative with 70,000 members and 10 branch locations.