

Native learning: Nixya'awii teaches tribal culture

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

East of Pendleton in Mission, on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, sits a school well known to tribal members but less so in other parts of Umatilla County. Nixya'awii Community High School (pronounced "Nick-ya-way") was created as a public charter school with the intent to address some of the needs of the Native American student population and the surrounding community. The charter focus is based on language and culture.

As a public school, Nixya'awii still requires the same amount of credits as a non-charter school, along with the same core classes and essential skills to graduate. They take the Smarter Balanced exam, as well.

Because the population of the school is small, averaging about 60 students from 9th through 12th grades, class sizes follow, ranging from 6 to 18 at any given time. So, while the teachers end up having to teach all levels of a subject, they are able to really make an impact on individual student achievement.

Being a charter school puts Nixya'awii in the position of being able to offer unique classes and opportunities to its students. Rather than Spanish or French, Nixya'awii students can take Umatilla, Walla Walla, or Nez Perce as a foreign language requirement. They are also offered classes in traditional



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In addition to playing sports like basketball and lacrosse, Nixya'awii students also learn older traditional games, such as double ball.

arts such as beading, and even a class in specialized fishing ties. A couple years ago, the seniors in the advanced language classes successfully completed the daunting task of translating well-known children's stories into native languages and uploading them to ebook format.

One of the most well-known school groups is the Traditional Drum and Dance Team. For years, it has performed at assemblies in area schools, as well as at community events both locally and in the

surrounding areas at powwows and other events.

Being located on the reservation, the school is very involved in the native community. One of the biggest events is participation in the root gathering and Children's Feast each year. In this weeklong event, members of the tribes teach children the history of the tribal people, specifically with regard to diet. The elders teach the young people how to gather and dig certain roots and how to prepare them. The activities end with a celebratory feast. Field trips are also culturally based. For example, the school took a trip to the fish hatchery at Cascade Locks last year.

Community involvement in the school itself ebbs and flows, allowing the school

to offer different culturally based classes from year to year. The school has strong ties to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Yellowhawk Tribal Health, Cayuse Technologies and Wildhorse Resort. It relies on volunteers to teach the students about the traditions of the native tribes and give the students a strong connection to the community.

Not all students at Nixya'awii are Native American, although they do make up about 90 percent of



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the student population. According to principal Ryan Heinrich, the school's size and participation in Division I sports are a big draw, as is the four-day school week. The shortened week is certainly helpful when teams need to travel to games. Nixya'awii starts mid-August, which is earlier than the rest of the district, and therefore allows the students to end the school year earlier as well, at the beginning of June.

While the school has a strict attendance policy, there are some cultural events that are excused by the school, not common in a mainstream school. Some students take days off to participate in their First Hunt or First Kill, going off with a relative on their first hunting trip. A death in the family might call for some extra days off as well, in addition to the day of the funeral. Students are given assignments related to their reason for being out of school, in order to make up for the work they missed.

Chartered in 2004, Nixya'awii provides a valuable educational home for our tribal population in Eastern Oregon. By respecting and valuing the culture of its students, and perpetuating the knowledge of the traditions and lifestyles, the school serves its community extremely well.

Suzanne Kennedy is a former middle school teacher who lives in Pendleton with her husband and three children.