



Alt Ed school students Alex Johnson, left, and Savannah Barreto work on a class art project.

Steve Tool/Chieftain

Building Healthy Families keeping students on track

By S.F. Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Students mill around the class area while the volume of incessant chatter rises.

“All right, you know this is time for art class, which means it’s time to sit down and get busy.”

Instant silence follows except for the shuffle of students getting into their seats. The authoritative voice belongs to Maria Weer, executive director of Building Healthy Families, currently in her role as chief instructor for Wallowa County Alternative Education. Weer holds certification as both an English and science instructor.

Alt Ed, as it is called, contributes to the county’s high school graduation rates by taking on students who don’t necessarily fit into traditional classrooms. “We have some kids and parents pushing for another name because Alt Ed has negative connotations,” Weer said.

The program is in the midst of its sixth year. Four students from Joseph and 12 from Enterprise participate in the program. Although the program is open to Wallowa school students, transportation costs tend to discourage their participation.

“There was a need, and we’d shown enough success that the other schools were interested. Now it goes on a slot system where schools buy X number of slots for the year,” Weer said.

Unlike the county’s traditional schools, Alt Ed runs on half days, four days per week starting at 8 a.m. and ending at 1 p.m. The 8 a.m. start includes providing students with breakfast. “We have a lot of students who work, and the hours are more conducive with a work schedule,” Weer said.

Sophomore student Jake Eaves had difficulty fitting in at both Enterprise and Joseph



Steve Tool/Chieftain

Student Jake Eaves found success once he joined the Alt Ed program.

schools. Alt Ed turned out to be his ticket to success. “The teachers really care here. The students here know what you’ve been through and it helps a lot. It’s really a better atmosphere.”

Eaves’ favorite class is chemistry and he plans to attend an Ivy League university and major in engineering.

Weer said she occasionally gets students so far behind in credits it takes an extra year for them to graduate. “We consider any graduate a success, whether it’s four or five years,” she said.

Weer estimated close to 20 students graduated from her school through the years with four slated to graduate this year, three on time. The school gets some students only a few credits shy of graduation. “A lot of times we’re just finishing the last pieces of the puzzle,” Weer said.

Unlike many alternative high schools, most of Weer’s students do not come with behavioral problems, but cannot succeed in a traditional class-

room setting. “The majority of kids are behind in credits, but some are not behind and are here by choice or because they had enough high-risk factors in junior high to come over here,” Weer said. All but two of Weer’s students come from single-parent households and BHF can wrap family support services with education.

Weer said she has few problems with chronic absenteeism. “I start from the parent end with phone calls and co-students start texting from the peer end. It works pretty well when four people text you saying, ‘Why aren’t you at school?’ You end up coming to school.”

Weer had two chronically late boys who she later discovered were homeless. “We worked on hooking them up with resources to get them here on time. We can’t fix the situation, but I think we have the capacity to get to the root of the problem because we have so few kids and so many staff. We have four aides for our 16 students,” Weer said.

Homeless students present a yearly challenge for Weer. “I’ve had at least one homeless student for every year I’ve taught. Last year I had four; this year I have two,” Weer said some home-

less students couch-surfed, while some camped at parks with parents. Others stayed in park restrooms for one or two nights.

Even if a student lacks parental support, Weer holds the student accountable for their education. “My general theory is, when you get to high school, it’s your education and not everybody was dealt the same hand, so you really have to take ownership,” Weer said.

Weer said her staff takes pains to let the students know they’re wanted. “What’s important is that kids know the staff all love what they’re doing. I don’t think they (the students) feel like because they were asked to come here, like they’re being thrown away. I think they’re appreciative that the district saw that they had different needs.”

Thank You

The family of “Bud” Haun would like to say THANK YOU for the cards, flowers, food, phone calls, prayers, visits and lovely dinner given to us by the catholic ladies. Friends and neighbors like you mean a lot to Bud’s wife Berline, daughter Jeanette Langston and husband Nick, brother Joe Haun and wife Rita and three grandsons and one great granddaughter. Thanks Again!

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BIRTH

A daughter, Alison Vonna Smith, was born February 8, 2015, in Enterprise to Brady and Sara Smith of Lostine. Grandparents are Lora and Alan Hawksley, and Lani and Don Smith.

A son, Daniel John Hanson, was born February 17, 2015, in Enterprise to Russell and Katherine Hanson of Enterprise. Grandparents are Brenda and John Sullivan, and Wanda and Chris Hanson.

School run by BHF also helping homeless students

By S.F. Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — At the Alternative Education school run by Building Healthy Families, “Tyler” and his brother “Matt” (both names are pseudonyms here) are the school’s two homeless students. Tyler’s mother cannot provide a home for the brothers, so they temporarily “couch-surf” at separate residences while their mother stays with co-workers.

“Our mother’s been trying to find us a home for quite some time. She’s trying, and I’m just like ‘it’s OK, mom.’ It’s not easy, especially out here,” Tyler said.

Tyler and his brother remain quite close. “We’re basically attached at the hip since

we’ve moved here because we’ve realized we’re all we’ve got.”

During the tourist season Tyler works at a local restaurant. “I wash dishes and bus a lot of tables. I like working. School is basically half-day and working gave me structure and kept me going,” Tyler said.

Other than attending a school outside of Oregon for a year, the Alt Ed school in Enterprise provided all the boys’ high school education.

Other than finding permanent housing, Tyler’s immediate goals include finishing high school and attending community college with the hope of eventually finding employment as a tattoo artist and opening his own shop.

Wyden wants biomass-powered fed facilities

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden wants the federal government to replicate the successful use of biomass energy in Wallowa County and other parts of Oregon by using the renewable energy source when it leases or builds federal facilities in the state.

In a letter to the General Services Administrator and the U.S. Forest Service chief, Wyden urged the GSA to reconsider constraints on using biomass in federal facilities for heat, or combined heat and power, in certain circumstances.

The senator highlighted how Oregon rural communities lacking access to natural gas have turned to biomass for

heating, generating cost savings and pollution reductions.

In Wallowa County, Wallowa Resources saved \$40,000 a year in annual energy costs when it converted to biomass heating as did the Enterprise School District, which saved \$70,000 a year.

“Despite these promising developments, I have heard from my constituents that the GSA process is making it difficult for new Forest Service building leases to utilize biomass for heat and energy,” Wyden wrote, citing the lack of a permanent office or visitor center at the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest because of the GSA biomass constraints.

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Student of the Week

Ashley Campbell is a junior at Wallowa High School. She is the daughter of John and Stacey Campbell. Ashley is a community-minded student. She volunteers a lot of her personal time to organizations both in the school and the community. She is the Secretary of the Junior class, which has a very large time commitment. Ashley is also an active member of the Wallowa Volunteer Fire Department. This student is always willing to step up and help when needed. If asked to pitch in, her answer is always “yes.”

Ashley Campbell
Wallowa High School

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The Student of the Week is chosen for academic achievement and community involvement. Students are selected by the administrators of their respective schools.

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