

## Warm Springs Elementary School featured in Summer edition of education magazine

### Teaching from the Heart

On the Warm Springs Reservation, teachers offer students stability, new pathways to learning, and a connection to their tribal heritage.



Warm Springs teacher Cary Varela has found a community on the "rez."

Story and photos by JUDY BLANKENSHIP

**WARM SPRINGS, Oregon** — The Warm Springs Elementary School, with its long, low, central building and satellite single-wides and modulars, sits like a homely cousin amid the stately, two-story brick structures left over from Bureau of Indian Affairs days, when a boarding school occupied the site. Logging trucks rumble by on the highway just above the playground, carrying timber from Central Oregon to Portland, 100 miles away. The sprinkling of houses and tribal government buildings that constitute the town of Warm Springs radiate out from the school and up the surrounding hills. With 380 students in kindergarten to fourth grade, the school sits at the heart of the "rez," as everyone here calls the reservation. Ninety-eight percent of the children are Native American, descended from one of three tribes — the Wasco, Paiute, and Warm Springs people — settled on the 644,000-acre reservation by a 19th-century government treaty.



### The Way It Was

That Warm Springs Elementary would be a semifinalist in last year's U.S. Department of Education's National Awards Program for Model Professional Development seemed an impossible dream when Dawn Smith came on board as principal six years ago. A chronically high exodus of staff that had persisted for 25 years had left the school in a shambles. "Teachers and principals would come here for the experience," says Smith, "but what they got instead was a big culture shock." Some didn't even stay the year. Student attendance was spotty, achievement scores were at rock bottom, and professional development was unknown.

The remarkable turnaround of Warm Springs Elementary can be attributed to many factors, but everyone interviewed at the school earlier this year agrees that the transformation is largely due to the leadership of Dawn Smith. A Klamath Indian, Smith was recruited by the Warm Springs tribe 26 years ago while an education senior at the University of Northern Colorado. She was invited to do a year's internship with the Jefferson County School District, with the promise of a job if there were openings.

The following year Smith was hired as a first-grade teacher at Warm Springs, where she was one of two native teachers. She stayed 13 years in the first-grade classroom, during which time she married a Warm Springs man and had two children. In 1992, after a stint as a counselor, Smith served as vice principal for a year while traveling "over to the valley" to get her principal's credentials. True to the established pattern, the presiding principal left the school at the end of that year, and Smith found herself at the helm of Warm Springs.

"Things were very chaotic here," remembers Smith, a 46-year-old woman with short, dark hair and a serious demeanor. "Many kids were disrespectful and did pretty much whatever they wanted. Instruction time was practically nil because behavior management was such a problem. I think that's why I got hired," Smith adds. "I had a mission, I wasn't going anywhere, I knew

the kids and the community, and I knew what the school could be."

### Beginning the Turnaround: "No Less than Five Years"

When Smith describes the thorny process she and her staff undertook to create a unified curriculum, it sounds a lot like a bunch of people trying to put together one of those giant landscape puzzles. The tiny pieces were laid out on the table, and the eager players gathered around. They had a vision of what the final product should look like, but the challenge was fitting the pieces together to make a coherent big picture. Smith cut whole-staff meetings to once a month and organized grade-level teams to meet the other three weeks. Each team was charged with developing language arts and math curricula. Then the entire staff came together to make sure each grade-level curriculum was thorough, systemic, and met district and state goals.

"Dawn has a gift for identifying talent in her teachers and matching that talent to the job that needs to be done," says Johnson. "She found the people on her staff who are natural curriculum writers and who could get down to the core of what needs to be taught at what grade level, and in what order. This school does more in curriculum development than any school I know in terms of teachers knowing what they're supposed to be teaching and how to teach it."

### Putting the puzzle together: Curriculum reform and professional development

In the summer of 1993 Smith launched into the most serious problem facing the school: recruitment and retention of staff. She let candidates applying for teaching jobs know that if they wanted to work at Warm Springs, they needed to make a commitment of five years. That eliminated a lot of applicants, she says, but it inspired others to rise to the challenge.

"My first year as principal I hired 16 new staff members," Smith recalls. "By then I knew I needed people who were committed to teaching every single kid in the school. Most of those who applied had good skills, but beyond that we were looking for teachers with good hearts, those who had a mission and who had the courage to stick it out. That's what we looked for from then on, and that's what we got."

Cary Varela was one of those who showed up for an interview that year. "I was recently divorced, raising a daughter alone, and looking for a place to put down roots. Dawn asked me to commit to five years. She said she was looking for someone who was going to make a difference." Varela adds, "I feel I have found a community here. I have no intention of leaving." Not that the work is easy. "As a bank teller I used to think that getting held up at gunpoint was hard, but this is harder!" she says. "It's the hardest job I've had, but it's also the most rewarding."

As Varela talks, her second-graders have gone home for the day and she is waiting for an ex-student, now a sixth-grader, to come in for a tutoring session. She ran into him at the Safeway in Madras the other day, she says, and "when he said he was having trouble in school, I told him to come see me. I feel responsible."

Six years later, nearly half of those teachers hired in 1993 are still at Warm Springs, and turnover of staff hired since then has slowed to a trickle. "The teachers that Dawn recruited have stayed because of her ability to retain them," says Keith Johnson, Assistant Superintendent of Jefferson County School District, "and because they are a unique bunch of young people. The sense of community among her staff is really rare, and nice when you can get it."

The first challenge facing Smith and her team was to gain control of student behavior. "We came up with behavioral guidelines for every area of the school," says Smith, "and we wrote them down: 'This is what it looks like when students are in the hallways; this is what assembly behavior looks like; this is what a classroom should look like when the teacher is doing direct instruction.' And then we agreed on how we were going to teach those behaviors to the children."

Slowly, change began to happen. The graffiti disappeared, the daily trashing of the bathrooms stopped, students began to walk quietly in the hallways, and they learned to pay attention when a teacher was talking. "No principal before Dawn was able to get control of the kids' behavior," recalls Johnson. Today the school appears to a visitor as a model of decorum as nearly 400 youngsters move between several buildings through the rhythm of a crowded school day.

According to her staff, Principal Smith also has a particular talent for promoting creative professional development. "I've never been in a school like this, where everyone is encouraged to go out and gather information and bring it back to share," says Varela. "It's not an attitude of 'we'll try anything,' but if you can show her research, or a rationale, or at least some good example of others who have tried it, she's willing to send us for training or bring training here."

Varela gives a good example of a staff-initiated innovation. "My first year here, the average first-grade reading score was 17 percent. So the kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers formed an action research team and got money from a state department grant to hire a reading consultant. Darla Wood Walters, who lives in Bend but is from New Zealand, came to the school and trained the K-2 teachers in a reading and writing technique we call the New Zealand method. The next year the program went schoolwide. It was exciting that agreed to try it."

Varela was so inspired by the success of the method that she paid her own way to New Zealand to see the program firsthand. Last year the reading scores for Warm Springs first-graders had climbed to the 40th percentile.

Other professional development initiatives unique to Warm Springs include inservice training for new teachers by tribal members on the history, infrastructure, and customs of the tribe, such as those around death and grieving. All Warm Springs staff are encouraged to take advantage of native language classes offered by a tribal Culture and Heritage Department.

### A partnership with Lewis & Clark

In 1998, with the ESL classification in hand, Warm Springs joined forces with Lewis & Clark College in Portland to create a unique, onsite, ESL teacher-training program. Dr. Lynn Reer, Visiting Assistant Professor of Education at Lewis & Clark and respected by colleagues as one of the best language-acquisition experts in the Northwest, worked with Smith and Johnson to design a program of instruction to equip teachers to work with the special needs of Warm Springs students whose language is caught in transition. The program consists of six classes, given onsite by Lewis & Clark instructors. The classes are offered on weekends through the school year and also during the summer academy, which in 1999 served as a "laboratory" for staff training.

"I was absolutely delighted and touched by how much the Warm Springs teachers care," says Reer. "They respect the community and want to know more about how to include their students' experiences, culture, and home life in their classroom instruction. They work hard and are eager to pick up on anything we bring them."

The last class of the two-year series is scheduled for June. Some teachers will earn their ESL endorsement, while others will put their credits toward a master's degree.

### The Future



Native language teacher Dallas Winishut Jr. helps Warm Springs students connect with their heritage.

These days, the future is much on the minds of those who care about Warm Springs. After a drop in enrollment in the mid-1990s due to an aggressive tribal birth-control education program referred to as "the Norplant years," the birth rate is up again. A surge of kindergartners is expected next fall. The tribal government is working with the district to build a new school on the reservation to accommodate the newcomers and to add the fifth grade.

Julie Quaid, director of the tribal Early Childhood Education program, feels strongly that kids from Warm Springs need more time to build self-confidence and firmly establish their academic skills before they leave for school outside the community. "These kids already have a lot of challenges, and then at age 12, to pull them away from the school and community they've known all their lives and to put them in a strange environment with a mix of other cultures, with teachers and children they don't know, that's very hard."

There are good reasons for concern. Out of 100 students who started first grade at Warm Springs Elementary in 1986, only 12 graduated from Madras High School last spring. "We're able to retain them in grades five and six," says Quaid, "but by

Continued on page 10

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