

# Education Department sets goals, outcomes

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Tribal Education Department plays a big part in the quality of life and standard of living of Tribal youth.

"It has an overwhelming amount of influence on helping Tribal members become and stay self-sufficient," said new Education Department Manager Eirik Thorsgard, who took the reins at the department on March 24. "It sets the stage for success in later education."

"Education assists the membership by offering services, programs and funding for Tribal members from kindergarten through college," said Higher Education Manager Bryan Langley, who was acting director of the department since September.

"Tribal Council placed a high priority on education and we are fortunate that it has had the foresight to create endowments that hopefully will be able to support all of the Education programs in the future. We want our members to be successful and education plays a key role in this success."

With the charge of preparing today's youth to become tomorrow's Tribal leaders, Education works with a number of other departments in accomplishing its mission.

Education is the lead agency helping members of the Tribe learn skills and earn the range of certificates and degrees that will help the Tribe's people. Supporting this mission are the Tribal Housing Authority, Social Services, Land and Culture and Vocational Rehabilitation departments. The Tribe's Public Affairs Department also is

assisting with the communications piece.

Setting the stage for the department's future direction are results from 2013's Chalkboard Project study, released in January, that was the first comprehensive study into existing conditions that Oregon's Tribal students face and how they perform in the state's educational system.

According to the Chalkboard Project's webpage, "The findings show that 75 percent of Oregon Tribe-enrolled students live in low-income households, almost one-third are enrolled in underperforming schools and nearly 50 percent are attending rural schools. These conditions, along with other factors, have led to significant achievement gaps among Oregon's Tribal students relative to their peers in the state. For example, Oregon Tribe-enrolled third-grade students have a 5.1-point gap in reading as compared to their peers. In math, Tribal-enrolled eighth-graders had a 4.7-point gap."

The analysis was conducted by ECONorthwest and commissioned by Spirit Mountain Community Fund and the Chalkboard Project. Seven of nine Oregon Tribes participated in the study.

The Education Department is "still in the planning stages of how to move forward and address the issues the study brought up," Langley said. "But it is clear that while many of our kids do very well, a very large portion of our Native students are not being well served by the Oregon education system and the work of the Tribe and of the state must rapidly evolve to better support our children," Langley

added.

"I consider this interTribal partnership that our own Spirit Mountain Community Fund helped coalesce to be the next really important policy initiative for Oregon's Tribal governments to step up and work together with Oregon and the federal government," said Assistant General Manager Chris Leno.

The Education Department also offers educational services, programs and funding for Tribal members from young mothers and infants, from kindergarten through college.

"We want our members to be successful and education plays a key role in this success," Thorsgard said.

Financial support and other kinds of education assistance have expanded in the last year. Basic computer training began assisting students working toward General Education Development certificates last year. GED services are heading toward completely online programs in the years ahead and the Education Department is working toward preparing its students for the change.

Funding for summer study for 19 full-time college students has been made available by Tribal Council and implemented by the department.

Library use has increased to more than 6,200 visits, 2,100 for computer use, and two cultural exhibits, developed and managed by the Education Department, were displayed through October of last year.

Department employees created the first fourth-grade Tribal history lesson curriculum that meets Oregon benchmarks and standards for the public school system. It went live at Willamina in the 2013-14 school year, ushering in an era of bringing local Native history to public classrooms. Seventy-eight children, including 10 members of the Tribe, participated.

Next school year, the curriculum will be made available to all districts statewide. Plans call for appropriate curricula to be available for all grades by 2018.

Many of the Tribe's education

programs come with the support of other departments.

The teaching of Tribal history and culture, for example, has moved into high gear through the Land and Culture Department, while Education has participated in a big way.

The program created 50 cultural activities last year, almost one every week. The activities opened the door to language, drum and dance for 23 students.

Among the department programs is one that comes through the Tribal Housing Authority. The Student Rental Assistance Program has provided "great resources for Tribal member students attending college," Langley said. "The cost of attending college continues to increase each year. We encourage students to seek out any additional resources that students can obtain without taking out loans. Getting through college with little to no debt is a great advantage to members moving toward self-sufficiency."

Partnerships with 18 state and Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library Services libraries provide Grand Ronde students access to countless new resources. Partnerships also were forged with Willamina and Sheridan school districts, boards and local governments.

The department has engaged in "a roll out of all programs, services and budgets to accomplish the Strategic Plan and the Tribal mission," said Langley.

The department evaluates education programs each year to see if programs and services are meeting the needs of the membership. When needs are unmet, the department "looks for creative solutions to address those needs," said Langley.

The goals and accomplishments are tied to the 2010 Strategic Plan adopted by Tribal Council, and to the Tribe's movement toward performance-based budgeting being implemented by the executive team.

General Manager Mark Johnston leads the effort, supported by Leno and Planning Director Rick George. ■

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## St. Michael's plans Rummage Sale

St. Michael's Catholic Church will hold a Rummage Sale from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday, April 4, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, April 5. For more information, contact Janelle Justen at 503-550-0923. ■

## Indian Fair set for May 10

"Sharing Our Culture, Educating Our Community" is the theme for an Indian Fair set to occur from noon to 5 p.m. Saturday, May 10, at the National Guard Armory, 541 S.W. Coast Highway, in Newport.

The Indian Fair is sponsored by the Siletz Tribal Arts and Heritage Society in cooperation with the Siletz Tribal Culture Department.

Displays of regalia, baskets and other art forms will be available for viewing. A wide array of items created by Native artists and crafts people will be for sale and Indian tacos will be available to purchase. For more information about the Indian Fair, call 541-351-8663. ■