

Chalk Talk

This month's column is by Vernonia High School Principal Mike Durbin, and Activities Director Patty Dickens-Turk.

When given the opportunity to prepare an article for "Chalk Talk," I knew I wanted to highlight kids and what great things they are accomplishing. There aren't a whole lot of positives about education in Oregon out there right now, so I wanted my focus to reflect on great things that our kids are doing. I approached Ms. Patty Dickens-Turk, our Leadership/Activities Director, for details on this year's key activities connected to leadership and Renaissance. I got quite an earful. I then asked Ms. Dickens-Turk to prepare information so that I could share it with you. What she wrote is exactly how I feel; therefore, I thought it would be best to share the piece with you as it was presented to me.

"Kids today are disrespectful, rude and slovenly. They do not care about their futures or their communities." These may be statements many people believe, however, in my role as teacher and activities director at Vernonia High School for five years, I have witnessed just the opposite. The majority of our students are polite and respectful. In addition, they strive to achieve academically and greatly contribute to the betterment of the local community and beyond.

The evidence of the students' positive character, achievements and volunteerism often remains unmentioned or unnoticed. My purpose in addressing the reading audience through this forum is to highlight several of the many accomplishments of Vernonia High Schools' students.

First, academic achievement is recognized through the Renaissance Awards Program at the end of each term. Since its inception in 1999, the number of students improving their GPA has continued to rise. At the Renaissance Assembly held on December 18, 2002, 79 high school students received recognition for improving their

Grade Point Average by .5 or better. In addition, 34 had a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Ten others received perfect attendance awards. Our students consistently strive to improve.

Another important influence in our school is the VHS Student Council and leadership class. Under the direction of Student Body President Heather Forster, students take part in and contribute to many charitable endeavors. This year alone, the students have raised \$2,680.30 for Juvenile Diabetes, Heather's President's Challenge. Further, our students collected and donated over 1,000 pounds of food for the yearly food drive and collected 46 pints of blood at the Blood Drive held in February.

Beside group efforts, individual students also stand out from the crowd. Last year, nine students took the Basic Firefighter training through a partnership between VHS, the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District and the Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District.

Of these students, five remain as volunteers helping the community. This year another ten students have enrolled in the program. Senior Paul Orlando volunteers daily at the Senior Center while two others donate time to Head Start. Likewise, senior Jake Brock, and a number of students and adults assisting him, held a benefit concert for Juvenile Diabetes, raising over another \$1,000. Then, there are our students like Rachael Bentsen who was in the top three for the scholarship award from the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the four members of last year's Quiz Bowl team, which brought home the league first place trophy. There are many more students like those mentioned here, and I apologize to any individual I did not name.

Although it is true that a few individuals do fit the stereotype of the misbehaving or rebelling teenager, at Vernonia High School, they are the minority. The majority of our students are teen role-models of whom we all can be proud.

Students make meetings fun; schedule changes possible

Student presentations provided a much-appreciated relief from the district financial crisis at the Vernonia school board meeting March 13th. Brittney Kerns introduced a preview of the sixth grade play "The Big Assignment." Kerns, working with teachers Marilyn Peterson and Cathy Ward, is writing and directing the play as part of her senior project. The performance will be April 3 at Washington Grade School.

Amy Rombach, junior high representative, told the board that the eighth grade is having a plant sale to raise the \$1200 needed to fund their trip to Wild Waves in the spring. Orders can be placed with any eighth-grade student or by contacting Kathy Fetch at WGS. Rombach also told the board that over 40 students have turned out for track this season and more are expected.

High school students Torin Tierney and Jason Hennessey gave a report about the just completed Wildlife Science class. The class took two field trips and spent a great deal of time outside. They also made and placed two different types of birdhouses, using GPS sitting, along Webb Way and near Vernonia Lake, and will continue to monitor them. Teacher Dennis DeWitt required class participation in habitat restoration work at Jackson Bottom Slough, Tierney said, who added that he thought he was picking up garbage.

VHS student public relations representative Sammy Purvee told the board that Leadership class presented an assembly in an attempt to communicate the damage done by chewing tobacco. Leadership is also pursuing four projects, Purvee said; development of a commons/lunch area for student use; pursuit of a grant to develop a sports complex/track that would allow VHS to host track events; purchasing textbooks for junior literature classes and development of a peer-counseling program.

Class Schedule

The instructional calendar proposed for the 2003-2004 school year includes early release of students on Fridays. According to Superintendent Mike Funderburg, Vernonia students receive many more hours of instructional time than

are required by the state (the state measures instructional time in hours, not in days). By approving a new block schedule, the district gains instructional hours due to the reduction in passing time between classes.

The proposed schedule would have junior high and high school students attend three 90-minute classes, one 60-minute class and a 30-minute advisory period Monday through Thursday. That corresponds to the current seven-period day, which contains an equivalent number of instructional hours. A substantial difference is that Friday's schedule would release students at approximately 1:30 p.m. The remainder of the day would be K-12 staff common preparation time and district staff development.

Funderburg told the board that, only by training and improving staff performance, could the district improve the quality of instruction. Staff development time would be used to improve academic performance, train staff in best practices, create professional learning teams across the curriculum, and create opportunities to fulfill the district's guiding principles and budget goals related to accountability. Scheduling athletic events on Friday or Saturday would reduce both missed instructional time and substitute costs. Funderburg stressed, however, that the schedule is being proposed primarily as a means of improving the quality of instruction, not as a money-saving device.

Washington Grade School teacher Ilene Grady said that WGS teachers were individually polled and that the proposal received 100 percent support.

Revenue "Adjustment"

The district has been informed that excess timber revenue from prior years would all be deducted from this year's revenue. In the past, similar corrections have occurred over a two-year period, making budget adjustments easier. Funderburg will provide more information at the April meeting, but he expressed the hope that, with measures already taken and by using the contingency fund, the district will be able to finish the year without cutting any more days.

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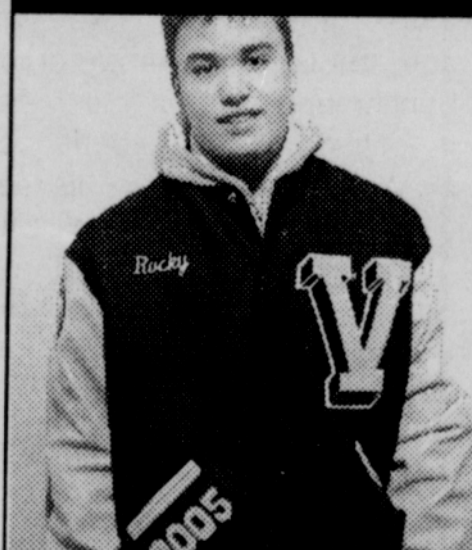
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