

NIELS PETERSON

Thirty-two year teaching veteran Niels Peterson teaches both English and French at Harrington High School. In addition, he serves his community as a Harrington city councilman, the vice president of the Harrington Opera House Society, and the president of the Lincoln County Housing Coalition.

It Isn't Always a Matter of Size

To The Honorable Cathy McMorris:

It is with great reservation and suspicion that today's legislators view the smaller "B" school districts within Washington state as productive and vital districts that articulate the state's educational goals as well as prepare fully their students. Far too frequently, such districts are seen as ineffective, outdated systems that produce great football and basketball players while not meeting the academic needs of their students. These districts cost the state a great deal of funding and should, perhaps, be eliminated in order to strengthen the fiscal position of the state's larger school systems. I have heard these arguments over and over again for the past 25 years. There is another side to this funding "coin" that should be examined. These smaller, rural districts can prepare their students in ways far different than their counterpart districts in the urban areas of Washington state.

During the 2003–2004 school year, graduates of Harrington High School completed their four-year degrees at West Point Military Academy, the University of California at Berkeley, and Stanford University. All three graduates came from a small district with fewer than 150 students. Are these three students the

exception to the rule or the norm? Neither word describes their cases. Students like them come from smaller schools each and every school year. These students are the products of schools that are small enough to address the individual needs of the student as well as prepare them for the lifelong competitions they may face, whether it be in the classroom, on the sports playfield, or in the corporate world.

The most important aspect of education offered by many smaller districts is the interpersonal connection between staff, students, and parents. It is not uncommon for students and teachers to prepare jointly their individualized learning plan for four or five years at a time. The teachers' class sizes are small enough to allow for a very deep and broad understanding of each student's abilities and capabilities. It is very difficult for a student to "fall through the cracks" in a small, rural school. This tailor-made education will capitalize on the students' strengths and maximize their weaknesses. With effort from all parties, the students should have a solid, structured foundation for life after high school. Hopefully, this process will result in lifelong learners.

Parents are brought on board early in the school career of each student. They, too, should be aware of their child's strengths and weaknesses. The dynamics and interaction between parent and

teacher are all student-centered with the maximum education of each child at the core. Involving some parents can, at best, be a difficult task. Two of the more successful avenues to foster this communication between school and home are the electronic portfolio and the student-led conference. Both have been used for the past four years in an effort to involve parents in their child's education and to allow students the chance to take some responsibility for their own education.

After this four-year period, we had 100 percent attendance at the student-led conferences during the 2003–2004 school year, and all students in grades 7–12 produced an electronic portfolio featuring their strengths, achievements, and educational goals. Students and parents were now aware of where students had been, where they are right now, and where they want to head.

One very positive attribute of teaching in a small, rural school is the amount of support from our small community of 500. They will support their community school through levy support as well as extracurricular program support. Our last levy passed with a 92.6 percent level of support. Our school is also the epicenter of all community activities. Without its school, a community may soon die like Endicott, Lamona, and Moeller after they consolidated with neigh-

boring districts. It is this recognition and appreciation that drives the positive community relations enjoyed by some small rural schools.

Very seldom do we find ourselves in a financial “do or die” situation. The district has maintained its cash reserve of from 10 percent to 12 percent for the past seven years. We have enjoyed consistent levy passage as well as bond passage. The school has undergone major building renovations, including a technology bond that provided the infrastructure for all classrooms. This support of our efforts in technology coupled with the computer hardware provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation through the Teacher Leadership Project has resulted in 1:2 computers for all K–12 students in our schools.

Preparation for students’ postsecondary education is another area in which the smaller school can excel. The Harrington High School Class of 2003 sent 100 percent of its 18 graduates to two-year or four-year colleges. These colleges ranged from Gonzaga University and the University of Washington to Washington State University and Whitman College. This year’s graduates will go to Pacific Lutheran University, Whitworth College, Washington State University, and Cottey College. Of the 14 students, one will enter the military service while the other 13 continue their postsecondary studies throughout the region. Such academic preparation

can be accomplished when the entire staff holds common values in education, works collaboratively, and appreciates their successes.

The Harrington Staff Inservice program has focused on the Wiggins/McTighe curriculum preparation plan called “Understanding by Design” (UbD). After making a four-year inservice commitment to this model, we decided to incorporate teachers on staff who had attended a one-week workshop held last summer in Santa Monica, Calif. These four teachers took the lead to become the trainers of our staff. They have developed the entire inservice program for the next several years in an attempt to cover thoroughly the concepts of UbD as well as to peer coach staff members as they teach a UbD lesson.

Like most high schools, Harrington has its issues with student discipline. Some students do use drugs and alcohol. Some students are involved in the court system and the welfare system. Overall though, most students come from two-parent, stable homes and have been members of the Harrington community for at least two generations. It is not uncommon for the high school office to receive phone calls from community members when a student is seen downtown during school hours. Such ownership of the well-being of our students is further proof of the community support we enjoy.

Some say that an education from the staff in Harrington is like having access to a private school. Class sizes range from 12 to 24 in most courses, and the staff-to-student ratio is approximately 1:11 in the high school. All teachers have master's degrees in their subject area, and they average 10 years of teaching in the district. We are able to pay attention to each and every student on a personal level as well as to their education. Although our district is small in size, the Harrington schools produce solid students who are capable and successful as they move on to begin their postsecondary education.

