

Niels Peterson from Harrington High School in Harrington, Washington wrote the following item for a specific legislator. This article stresses the need for rural schools to be taken seriously in Olympia for their academic achievements.

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 Far too frequently, such districts are seen as ineffective outdated systems that produce great football and basketball players while not meeting the academic needs of their students.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 twenty-five 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 less than 150 students in the K-12 district. 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 to 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 student's 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% attendance at the student-led conferences during the 2003-2004 school year and all students in 7-12 produced an electronic portfolio featuring their strengths, achievements and educational goals. Students and parents were now aware of where they were, where they are right now and where they want to head.

One very positive attribute of teaching in a small, rural school is to see the amount of support from our small community of 500. They will support their community school through levy support as well as extra-curricular program support. Our last levy passed with a 92.6% 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 neighboring 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%-12% 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 and Melinda Gates Foundation through the Teacher Leadership Project has resulted in 1.2 computers for all students K-12 in our schools.

Preparation for students’ post secondary education is another area in which the smaller school can excel. The Harrington High School Class of 2003 sent 100% 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 fourteen 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.” 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, CA. 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 12-24 in most courses and the staff to student ratio is approximately 1:11 in the high school. All teachers have a Master’s degree in their subject area and they average ten 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 post-secondary education.

I would welcome the chance to speak to you further on this subject. Please call me or email me at