

A Very Public Education

Klickitat School's national recognition for excellence begins with community support at home

By Jeanie Senior

The state and national awards for excellence won by Klickitat elementary and high schools in 2008 and 2009 are gratifying.

"We have a very dedicated long-term staff, and we're always trying to improve," Principal Kevin Davis says. "This isn't something that happened over the last couple of years. We've been working on it for a very long time, since the 1990s."

In 2008, Klickitat School was honored by the state superintendent of public instruction as one of 98 schools of distinction recognized for outstanding academic growth.

In September 2009, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced Klickitat was one of four schools in Washington and one of 314 in the country to be named a Blue Ribbon School. The award credited a dramatic improvement in student performance.

"We were surprised," Kevin says of the honor. "But we always try to get better every day."

Klickitat educators work toward a common goal: considering what is best for all of the some 125 students in grades K-12.

"We have a stable school board, community support, great parents, great students—all of us with one vision: doing better for our children in everything we do," Kevin says. "We're fairly flexible, willing to try new things to see if we can



Klickitat High School science teacher Jim Reed, left, and Principal Kevin Davis with Aba Kumi, director of the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools program, at an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C., in November.

make it better for our students. We look at a kid who wasn't successful and ask how can we change his day at school to make sure he graduates, goes on and fulfills his goals in life."

That vision is all the more impressive given the economic hard times the small town has faced in the past two decades. The sawmill that once was the center of Klickitat closed for good in the mid-1990s, putting millworkers and loggers out of work. More well-paying jobs were lost when aluminum smelters in The Dalles and Goldendale shut down less than a decade later.

The changes "really hurt us," Kevin says. "Like all of rural America, we've taken economic hits. I don't think we are isolated in that at all."

Kevin, who has been in the district

for 25 years, can recall only one time when district voters did not approve a school levy. School supporters are quick to lend a hand, such as the volunteers who provide a school music program.

But a limited budget and a limited teaching staff means the chief academic focus has to be on math and language arts.

In the high school, the two final periods are reserved for "selectives," classes where students do what Kevin calls project-based learning. That has ranged from online foreign language classes to scientific illustration, a class that combines both art and science.

Kevin and science teacher

Jim Reed, a 29-year veteran, went to Washington, D.C., in November to receive the Blue Ribbon award—a blue and gold plaque and a flag.

Being one of 314 schools to get the award out of about 135,000 districts in the United States is in itself a distinction. But the two Klickitat representatives found themselves in a rarefied subgroup.

"We are so small," Kevin says, pointing to the contrast with other districts at the D.C. gathering. "It's hard sometimes for us to relate. Some of those schools have 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 kids. They can't relate to us. We can't relate to them."

Not many other school principals also spend time in the classroom. This year, Kevin is teaching woodshop. He has taught a variety of classes through the years.

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— Klickitat School Principal Kevin Davis

Talking to other teachers and principals at the Blue Ribbon event, Jim says, convinced him Klickitat is doing things right.

“We got a sense of that,” he says. “We work hard and we belong here (among the award winners). Our kids work hard.”

For Kevin and Jim, the trip was their first visit to the nation’s capital.

“It was kind of sad that all the staff, the students and their parents couldn’t enjoy the event,” Kevin says.

The community got together to share its pride, however, when the two returned. An estimated 275 to 300 people—nearly two-thirds of the town’s residents—attended a community celebration that included a free turkey dinner.

When someone asked how many of those were Klickitat School alumni, about half the people in the gym stood up, Kevin says. The group included about a half-dozen alumni from the 1940s—including Bettie Duffield, a member of the Class of 1941.

Sponsors and hosts of the celebration included nearly every organization in Klickitat and members of the community.

Although it is small, Klickitat is not the smallest school district in Klickitat County. The Glenwood, Bickleton and Wishram districts have smaller enrollments. The small districts work together, however, and have fielded combined sports teams.

“We support each other,” Kevin says. “We do have each other.” ■



Above, besides his duties as principal, Kevin teaches woodshop this year. Below, Jim gives high school students tips on getting their work done before the bell. Some use Tootsie Pops to motivate them, Jim says.

