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**Klamath Falls City Schools**  
**District Newsletter**

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**Why the Change?**

By Paul Hillyer, Superintendent

*In case you missed it, a column that appeared in last Sunday's paper is re-issued below. Included in this version is additional information on how the district will move forward with planning for this 2013-2014 school year change.*

The Klamath Falls City Schools will be making a significant improvement in educating teenagers in the 2013-14 school year. They will change Ponderosa from a seventh- and eighth-grade junior high to a sixth-through eighth-grade middle school. What are the reasons for and ramifications of this change?

In Oregon, and nationwide, there has been a shift away from the high school-like junior high model to the more transitional middle-school model. As a result, this configuration is sometimes called the ele-middle model. This national and state change in the use of the two configuration models over the last forty years has been dramatic. The number of junior high schools decreased from 7,800 in 1970 to 3,000 in 2008. This represents a 62% decrease. At the same time, middle schools increased from 2,100 in 1970 to 13,100 in 2008, a 620% increase (National Center for Educational Statistics).

What accounts for this dramatic shift in schooling young adolescents? H. Jurgen Combs in his 2008 research on the change attributes much of the reason to the fact that children today mature much earlier than before. He reports that in 1910 children reached puberty at about age 12-14; in 2008 that age was 11. His study also says that puberty starts about four months earlier each decade. As a result, sixth graders have more in common with eighth graders than with kindergarteners.

Other reasons that districts have gone to a middle school vs. junior high model is that curriculum and standardized testing are typically organized in a grade six-through-eight combination. For example, when buying textbooks, one normally finds that they are organized in sixth-through-eighth grade editions instead of a kindergarten-through-sixth combination. National curriculum standards and standardized tests similarly are grouped for grades kindergarten-through-five and grades six-through-eight.

Another reason for the shift is to help students ease into greater independence before they enter the self-directed environment of high school. A middle school setup would ease this transition by having students go from a more self-contained classroom approach in sixth grade to the more departmentalized approach in eighth grade. To make this transition even less dramatic, middle schools usually are organized in such a way that each grade has its own area and seldom interacts with the other grades. Exceptions to this could take place on a course-by-course basis determined by the interests and ability of the individual students.

An additional advantage to this model for sixth graders is more offerings during and after school can be geared to their interests and abilities. It is hoped that the community at large will also step in and provide more during and after-school experiences to enrich the lives of the sixth graders.

Joining students in the district at a younger age provides another positive outcome. This is to allow students to make new friends and develop an understanding of people from different backgrounds at a time in which they are more open to such new relationships. This will be helpful in creating a culture of mutual respect that will pay dividends for them all the way through their high school years.

Moving students from elementary schools one year earlier frees up classrooms in all elementary buildings. This will make it possible to close an elementary school at some time should the board decide to do so. There has been much discussion about the pros and cons of such a school closure. One of the recommendations of last year's facility taskforce was the closure of one building to save capital and operating dollars. This is not possible unless sixth graders are added to Ponderosa.

One of the most important benefits of the middle school model is the gift of time. By creating a three-grade vs. a two-grade environment, staff will have the opportunity to develop stronger knowledge of students and working relationships with their parents. This will facilitate the personalization of instruction and support that is difficult in a two-year junior high.

In going to the sixth-grade middle school approach, Klamath Falls City Schools will do careful research and planning during the 2012-13 school year. They will share their progress quarterly with the board of directors and will communicate frequently with parents of fifth graders. They also will spend a great deal of time designing the use of Ponderosa's learning space to give as much separation as possible between grade levels.

The plan is to have a sixth-grade school-within-a-school taught by former elementary teachers. This sixth grade area would have fewer class movements and teacher changes than their

seventh- and eighth-grade counterparts would. This will help sixth graders gradually move into the upper-grade model they will experience in high school.

In conclusion, the district is addressing the needs of today's adolescents by moving to a middle school approach at Ponderosa. This will happen by adding sixth grade in the 2013-14 school year. This change provides many benefits to students. It gives KFCS the framework they need to address the academic and socio-emotional needs of young people during their challenging adolescent years.

**Other News:**

- Sky Lakes Medical Center is submitting a grant to provide swimming lessons for all third-grade students in the Basin. We are very thankful to Mike Reeder who is spearheading this effort for us.
- Over the last four years, both the City and County school districts have benefitted from a large grant called, "The Safe Schools Healthy Students Grant." It has provided mental health support, School Resource Officers (SRO), mentoring support, after-school programs, a truancy resource from juvenile justice, and drug and alcohol education to mention a few of the outstanding supports. The grant funding has not been renewed for the 2012-13 school year. As a result, the agencies that provided these programs are scrambling to come up with plans to continue the services.