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Klamath Falls City Schools

District Newsletter
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Getting Contestants to the Finish Line

The Iditarod dog sled race is a fascinating event. Conditions are challenging in best of years due to the Alaskan climate and harsh terrain. Sometimes this course gets even more challenging when a blizzard or extreme drop in temperature occurs, making finishing the race almost impossible for all but the toughest of competitors. This is an apt analogy for what the trek to graduation will be for our students in the very near future.

The class of 2016, our current 9th graders, will be facing a graduation course more challenging than any in state history. In order to get a regular high school diploma they will need to pass a blizzard of tests in reading, writing, and math. Making these assessments even more challenging are the rigorous new state standards soon required in Oregon schools. The math test, for example, will oblige students to apply math concepts and demonstrate deep mathematical understanding of content equivalent to what is covered in upper algebra courses. Added to these new requirements are increased math credit requirements mandating students to complete three math courses in Algebra 1 and above.

This changeover comes at a time when many students are not meeting current less demanding graduation standards in the state. Currently 69% of Oregon students are graduating in four years. At KU this percentage last year was 72%. Obviously, this percentage could be even less once the new requirements are in place. Using the Iditarod analogy once again, this potentially will keep fewer students from crossing the finish line.

So what is our school district doing to address this impending crisis? More importantly, what can the average citizen do to help? The school system is ramping up its efforts to help students in all grade levels to attain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed at their next level of instruction. This goal is being attacked in a number of ways including improving instructional strategies across the district, adding more reading and writing into the school day, and providing more academic supports for students who fail to meet grade-level targets.

Another deployed strategy is helping parents become active partners in their children's learning success. The first step in this direction occurred earlier this month at elementary parent-teacher conferences where instructors set goals with parents and students based on testing information. Student success is highly dependent on active parent participation in their children's learning. This goal setting creates the stage for this home and school partnership.

The community at large also plays a role in the learning expectations and success of their young. Here are a few strategies businesses can utilize to encourage learning achievement in Klamath Falls. These ideas come from Clarksville, Tennessee where a community-wide initiative has improved graduation from 73% in 2008 to 93% in 2012.

1. Become a school partner in education
2. Post upcoming school events on business marquees and other communications

3. Visit the schools three times a year
4. Provide an area in the workplace where school info can be disseminated
5. Allow/encourage employees to become tutors and/or mentors
6. Reward academic progress and attendance
7. Provide work study areas and materials for students in the workplace
8. Allow flexible work schedules for students

These are just a sampling of the many ways that businesses can encourage their employees to graduate. It says nothing about what churches, government agencies, service clubs, and other entities can do. The ideas are limited only by the determination and creativity of the community.

In closing, we need to create the conditions necessary to help more and more of our young people reach the finish line in the race towards graduation. The state has set a very challenging track for today's youth to navigate. Many will not successfully complete the race without the dedication and help from everyone in the community. Please ask yourself, "What can I do to help Klamath Falls students successfully complete high school and become successful productive adults?" A community-wide effort can make a big difference in helping our children become learning champions.

Other News:

- Teacher and principal teams from KFCS have identified high-performing state schools with demographic make-ups similar to Klamath Falls' schools. These teams are visiting schools to learn ideas and strategies to improve student achievement here. Many worthwhile ideas have already been identified through this effort.
- The district principals are emphasizing getting into classrooms frequently this year. During their visits they help coach teachers on effective strategies and partner with teachers to help improve instruction. KU principal, Jeff Bullock, uses a very interesting approach in this work. He follows a student throughout his/her schedule one day a week. He follows a different schedule and grade level each week. Through this method, he learns a great deal about the instruction in KU. It also helps him give helpful feedback to teachers. Perhaps most importantly, becoming a student one day a week gives Mr. Bullock a good understanding of what it is like to be a student at KU. Gaining this perspective is very helpful in identifying what is working for students and what could be improved.
- Last Wednesday morning we had our first Superintendent Student Advisory Meeting of the year. Once per quarter this group meets with the superintendent to give their perspective on their schools and make recommendations for improvements. Some positives that were noted in starting the year included reduced bullying, good teachers, nice secretaries, excellent school spirit, going back to a 7-period day at KU, activities, and good high school counselors. Some areas mentioned for improvement were lunches, more art classes, gossip, and more time during the day for school work.

I enjoy these quarterly meetings with students and use their input to get a better picture of what is happening in our schools. I also use their suggestions to initiate needed changes to make our schools more effective in addressing student learning and emotional needs.