

HEAD OF THE CLASS



A small Oregon district trains and retains effective teachers with the help of the Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success Project.

Story by RHONDA BARTON
Photos by DEE DIXON

TILLAMOOK, Oregon—Acres of lush green pastures, a picturesque bay teeming with Dungeness crab, and a reputation for producing world-class cheese have made Tillamook an attractive tourist destination on the Oregon coast. But the small, financially strapped community still struggled with hanging onto newly minted teachers. About half the new teaching staff would depart each year, lured away by higher salaries and greater opportunities in the urban Willamette Valley. Achievement scores—with only 11 percent of students at or above the state average—reflected this persistent problem of teacher turnover.

Facing those challenges, Tillamook became one of three pilot sites for an ambitious and innovative initiative called the CLASS (Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success) Project. The program is part of the Chalkboard Project, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose mission is “to unite Oregonians to make our K–12 schools among the nation’s best.” Funded by a consortium of foundations, Chalkboard launched the CLASS Project in 2006 with four components that work together to increase teacher effectiveness:

- Expand career paths so experienced teachers can assume new leadership roles, such as mentoring and instructional coaching
- Develop effective performance evaluations with clear goals tied to student achievement
- Provide targeted and relevant professional development to give teachers resources and support to improve their practice
- Implement new compensation models to recognize new roles and responsibilities and reward teacher effectiveness





Today, three years into the project, Tillamook is seeing impressive results: Districtwide achievement has steadily improved to 60 percent of students at or above the state average; one Tillamook elementary school that was in improvement status has turned around and captured statewide honors for stellar scores; and both new and veteran teachers have embraced a culture of collaboration and high expectations.

A new teacher retention program—combined with the state of the national economy—enabled Tillamook to keep

86 percent of its effective teachers last year compared to 75 percent in 2007–2008.

According to Superintendent Randy Schild, “It’s impossible to distinguish between the philosophies of CLASS and the district because they have become one and the same. We have become better at educating our students and supporting our teachers today than we ever have been.” Schild says that a year one planning grant of \$30,000 mobilized the district. Implementation grants of up to \$300,000 in years two and three, allowed

them to focus on developing their own strategies within the CLASS framework and “to make sure they were going to take us in the direction we were planning to go anyway.”

A CHAMPION SCHOOL

There’s probably no better place to see the fruits of that focused effort than at East Elementary School. Almost 60 percent of the school’s 420 students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and about one-third are minorities. In 2006, the school was designated by the state as

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Jenny Sheets’ fourth-graders are learning “all about matter.” As she instructs her class in how to create a journal where they’ll record facts about atoms, solids, liquids, and gas, she incorporates GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Development) strategies that are aimed especially at helping ELL students succeed. GLAD training was just one of the teacher supports that have contributed to effective teaching and soaring student proficiency scores at East Elementary.

Sheets is in her sixth year of teaching. She sees high-quality professional development as a key component in creating effective teachers. “The CLASS Project has allowed me to attend many trainings that otherwise we wouldn’t have funding for,” she says. “Also, I was involved in the mentor/mentee program where I was able to go around with my mentee and observe various teachers using a wide variety of strategies in reading and math. This was a great time to collaborate with my mentee to share experiences, questions, or ideas.”

Training in writing is a primary focus this year for Sheets and her peers. The fourth-grade team at East has set a collective goal of teaching students to become better writers and improving test scores in writing. “This is an obstacle that we have been dealing with for many years,” she notes. “The CLASS Project has helped with this by allowing us to attend some trainings to learn new strategies to teach writing. We have also been able to create a fourth-grade writing folder with lessons, exam-

ples, and assessments.”

The CLASS Project also provided funds for mini-grants that teams and individual teachers can use to create instructional units and other resources. Last year, Sheets and the fourth-grade team developed a series of units on health and measurement, which students rotated through during a week’s time. “Each teacher became a master on one topic and taught it to the whole fourth grade over the course of a week,” she says. “Then we all gave the same post-test to our students and the results were amazing.”

Sheets finds that mini-grants are great incentives to tackle intensive projects that are time consuming. And, she says, having money to buy supplies for those project solves one of the biggest problems teachers encounter.

Jenny Sheets credits the ramped up professional development, including GLAD training, for helping East Elementary go from school improvement status to a designation as a 2010 “Champion School” in Oregon.



in need of improvement. Since that time, East's combined scores on the Oregon achievement tests have jumped to 92 percent of students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading and math. Oregon Superintendent Susan Castillo recognized that accomplishment by naming East as a 2010 "Champion School"—one of only 10 in the state to receive that accolade.

Principal Greg English, who arrived in 2006, found staff "pretty much doing their own thing. There was a lot of isolation—people closed their doors and worked really hard at being good teachers, but everyone was an independent contractor," he recalls.

Forming a leadership team was the first step in bringing staff together and examining what was working, what needed to be tweaked, and what was missing. English and his staff recognized that the school was in improvement status because it wasn't meeting the needs of English language learner (ELL) students who comprise 13 percent of the population. "We made some changes in the configuration of how we place those students in the classroom: Rather than have a lot of ELL students clumped together in a single classroom, we spread them equally, creating differentiated classrooms with all our different populations. We also provided virtually everybody on staff with two days of training on GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Development)," English explains. "Then, we did five days of training with another 19 staff members, who've become fully certified in GLAD. We found that not only did our ELL students benefit, but all of our students benefitted."

East, like the other four schools in the district, also radically changed its approach to how it supports, evaluates, and motivates teachers. A 90-minute late opening once a week was introduced to provide time for grade-level and content-area team meetings. Teachers can apply for mini-grants to work together to develop instructional units.

All first- and second-year teachers are paired with more experienced mentors who guide them through the first two years in the classroom. New educational



As a new teacher, Lindsey Thompson is one of the beneficiaries of an innovative compensation plan that's tied to teacher retention. The plan rewards teachers for high evaluation ratings in their first three years with money deposited into a fund that can only be accessed in the fifth year of employment.

REWARDING AND RETAINING NEW TEACHERS

Fifth-grade teacher Lindsey Thompson has perfected the art of multi-tasking. During an independent mini-class session, Thompson reviews a recent math test with one student while smoothly fielding questions from others about science, spelling, and social studies projects. The ease with which she handles the competing needs of students belies the fact that this is just her fourth year in the classroom.

As a relative newcomer, she's taking part in Tillamook School District's new teacher incentive program. In their first three years, teachers can earn \$80 for each "distinguished" rating and \$40 for each "proficient" rating on the 22 skills the district measures during annual evaluations. The money is deposited into a fund that the teacher can access after beginning her fifth year with the district. The funds can only be used for certain expenses such as making home improvements or purchasing a house—things that encourage people to put down roots in the community.

Thompson is from Tillamook, so it's likely she would remain in the area even without the incentives. However, she acknowledges that it could make a difference for some of her peers. "People understand that Tillamook is a hard place to want to stay if you're from some place bigger," she says. "A lot of people come with the intention of eventually moving on." Because the extra compensation is specifically tied to retention, she says, no one regards it as merit or performance pay. That's one reason why the union has supported the program.

Tillamook teachers also are enthusiastic about the district's new evaluation system for both new and veteran teachers. It includes specific goals for enhancing professional practice and increasing student achievement. "People appreciate that it's clearer and it's easy to see where you should be and what you need to do [to increase performance] in each domain," says Thompson.

assistants (EAs) also are assigned mentors, though the mentor may have three EA mentees while the teacher model is a one-to-one approach. The CLASS grant helps cover the \$900–\$1,800 stipend to teacher mentors and pays for the time that the hourly EA mentors and mentees

spend meeting. "That's the nice thing about the CLASS Project grant," says Tillamook's CLASS Coordinator Linda Shuford. "The Chalkboard Project allows us to experiment. They give us lots of space to be innovative." As far as she knows, no other district has launched an

EA mentorship program.

Shuford herself is another example of a CLASS-supported innovation. Previously a fifth-grade teacher at East, she's now responsible for overseeing the project. Career pathway opportunities mean that effective teachers can take on new roles—usually with extra pay attached—from coaching to serving as administrators to heading up data teams. “I feel like I’m part of being able to create opportunities for teachers who have worked so hard,” says Shuford. “I hope they can expand their horizons.”

A NEW WAY TO EVALUATE EFFECTIVENESS

One of the biggest—and potentially most controversial—changes at East and throughout the district is the performance evaluation process. Influenced by the work of national evaluation guru Charlotte Danielson, the process focuses on four domains: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Within those domains, teachers are judged on 22 skill sets, with ratings from unsatisfactory to basic, proficient, or distinguished. They are held accountable for specific performance goals, which they set themselves in collaboration with their administrators. Lindsey Thompson, a fifth-grade teacher, is working this year on the schoolwide goal of improving writing proficiency for at least 80 percent of students. She also set a goal for herself: to incorporate more GLAD strategies such as using visuals into her classroom instruction. How well she meets those goals will be reflected in her evaluation scores.

Superintendent Schild believes that the new system “rewards good teaching, not just surviving.” It also recognizes that student success depends on a number of variables, not all of which are under a teacher’s control. As the CLASS Project literature notes, “Student learning gains included in performance evaluations are based on multiple measures, and are used to advance the quality of teaching and learning.”

To support the goal of teacher retention,



Title I teacher Rachel Williamson says having a mentor can help new teachers feel less overwhelmed in the classroom. In Tillamook, all first- and second-year teachers are assigned mentors, as are new educational assistants.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS

In a small classroom carved out behind the auditorium stage at East Elementary, Title I teacher Rachel Williamson works with seven students on sharpening their reading for understanding. This is Williamson’s 13th year in the Tillamook School District, but the memory of what it was like to be a beginning teacher is still fresh. “As a new teacher, I remember feeling overwhelmed by the task of creating a curriculum map for the year,” she says. “I wasn’t even sure what the curriculum was at the school or where to locate it, and I was so worried that I would skip teaching something that the students needed to know. When I asked my partner teacher, I was told to ‘just use the books.’ I remember feeling so lost and overwhelmed. I muddled through, but it would have been very helpful if an experienced teacher had been able to take the time to help me develop that skill faster and with fewer tears of frustration.”

The district’s new teacher mentorship program is working to assuage that feeling

of being overwhelmed by the demands of the classroom. To be selected, a mentor has to have at least three years of experience teaching in the district, in addition to strong communication skills, positive peer relationships, a high performance rating, and approval of the principal.

Lindsey Thompson has seen the value of the mentor program from both sides of the relationship. As a new teacher four years ago she was paired with Linda Shuford, who is currently the CLASS Project coordinator. “I struggled with getting my students’ attention,” she recalls. “I would ask for their attention and then as soon as they were quiet I would start my lesson. However, after being observed by my mentor (Linda), I learned that I needed to wait longer and have not only their voices off, but make sure all of their eyes were looking at me. Her advice is in the front of my brain everyday and has made me a much more effective teacher.”

Now Thompson mentors a teacher who has taught for a number of years but is new to the fifth grade. “We work together on knowing what she’s supposed to teach and different ways to do it, bouncing ideas off each other,” she says. “Having a mentoring program can make a huge difference.”

Tillamook built an innovative incentive program into its evaluation of new teachers. Evaluated annually in the first three years, new teachers can earn \$80 for each “distinguished” rating and \$40 for each “proficient” rating within the 22 skill measures. Stipends of \$100 are awarded for community volunteer activities such as coaching a Y team or leading a Boy Scout troop. The money—which can add up to a hefty \$6,000 over four years—is set aside in a district fund that the teacher can access only after beginning the fifth year of employment. “We feel that if they become embedded into our community, they’ll want to stay,” Shuford observes.

SUSTAINING IMPROVEMENTS

The financial support and other resources provided by the CLASS Project have obviously been a critical part of Tillamook’s success story. But, Superintendent Schild claims that CLASS can’t take all the credit for how far the district has come. “CLASS is a huge piece, but it’s not the only thing,” he says. “There are 100 things that have to do with consistency and focus.” That’s why Schild—who is a product himself of the Tillamook School District—is confident that the work can be sustained once the CLASS grant runs its course.



“There are some things we’ll choose not to do, possibly, but a lot of what we’ve done has become part of who we are,” Schild says. “Our mentor program—we couldn’t stop it. It would leave such a hole, now that we see how important it is.”

Tillamook’s experience is being closely watched—along with the 11 other CLASS Project districts in Oregon. Together, they represent one in every six Oregon students and 18 percent of the state’s teachers. According to Sue Hildick, president of the Chalkboard Project, “CLASS is fast becoming a national model because of both the early results and the process. The early results are dramatic—student achievement indicators are increasing and teacher satisfaction levels are increasing.”

She continues, “Other districts should look at Tillamook’s results. They will be inspired: much stronger teacher retention rates; great student achievement outcomes; and a long-term commitment to excellence by all those involved in the learning community in Tillamook.”

The small town that’s struggled in the past with low student success and high teacher turnover now can brag about its educational system, as well as its cheese. ■

What Does It Take To Become a Member of the CLASS?

Tillamook, Sherwood, and Forest Grove comprise the first cohort of CLASS Project districts and are well on their way to implementing improvements. Another nine Oregon school districts are in the planning stage, and at least eight more have approached Chalkboard about joining the project. Chalkboard President Sue Hildick says that districts interested in having CLASS-type discussions need the support of their union, administration, and school board. Once those partners are on board, they should contact Chalkboard (www.chalkboardproject.org) about the possibility of receiving a design grant. “Design funds allow a district to assemble a design team—heavily weighted toward teachers—to come together and have critical conversations around the four key elements of career ladders, professional development, evaluation, and compensation,” she says.



(Left) CLASS Project Coordinator Linda Schuford and East Elementary Principal Greg English compare notes on new initiatives funded by the project. Superintendent Randy Schild (above) says that CLASS helped the district focus on specific areas to drive improvement.