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State recognizes school district's community partnerships

By Terry Dillman Of the News-Times

Two collaborative efforts within the Lincoln County School District - one in Lincoln City, the other in Siletz - earned state recognition this week with State Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo's April 8 announcement of the 2008 Outstanding Community/School Partnership Awards.

The Siletz Tribal Community School Partnership and the Lincoln City Backpacks for Kids Program were among the seven recipients named based on dedicated missions, diverse participants and partnerships, sustainable funding, meaningful programs, and attainable goals.

"Teamwork and partnership are wise investments in our schools, our students, their families, and our communities," Castillo said. "When we pool our resources and services, we ensure that each and every child is given the best chance to succeed. When every community puts education first, then the needs of all children are met through the work of family members, community members, and school leaders."

The Siletz effort began in 2003, when community members rallied to rescue the elementary school from the brink of closure due to budget cuts. They formed the Siletz Valley School, a K-8 charter school forged just in time for the start of the 2003-2004 school year.

Community and tribal leaders have done whatever they could to keep the school viable, while working toward their dream of restarting the high school (grades 9-12) program, which had been dormant since 1982. They reached that goal during the 2005-2006 school year when the doors opened to the Siletz Valley Early College Academy, a second charter school designed to provide Siletz area students with an integrated, seamless K-12 program. The school also provides an opportunity for students to earn college credits and graduate with a high school diploma in one hand, and an associate's degree in the other.

A strong partnership between school and community, including the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, provides the foundation for success.

"The Siletz Tribal Community School Partnership is working together to create the best education experience for students to live, work, and progress in a diverse society," Castillo noted. "Their efforts are paying off."

The K-8 school met Annual Yearly Progress targets under the federal No Child Left Behind Act for the past two years, and received a "strong" rating on the 2006-2007 Oregon school report card. The Siletz Tribe provided supplemental funding to enhance academic programs and building maintenance projects, and other partnership activities have developed preventive drug programs, interwoven tribal cultural understanding and Siletz language into the classrooms, and provided a pool of classroom volunteers.

LCSD Superintendent Tom Rinearson called the effort "incredible," noting the "truly symbiotic

relationship" between the school and the community that "makes it successful."

Lincoln City folks are equally supportive of a vital effort to provide "chronically hungry" children with proper nutrition by sending them home on weekends with backpacks stuffed with easy-to-prepare foods they can eat during the critical times when they lack access to school breakfast and lunch programs. Originated at Oceanlake Elementary under the auspices of Pat Robertson and Karen Dummer, the program stocks backpacks with nutritious, child-friendly foods, and distributes them "discreetly and confidentially" to students on the last day of each school week.

Organizers say many children rely on school cafeterias for their most nutritious meal of the day, and in some cases, the only meal(s) they receive. Studies indicate backpack food programs boost attendance, student concentration abilities, and academic achievement, while simultaneously reducing behavioral problems at school.

The north Lincoln County effort began at the elementary level, but has since expanded to encompass middle and high school students. Organizers say foods must be "shelf stable, easy to prepare, and nutritionally sound." Among the items they seek are bread, peanut butter, jelly, soups, crackers, sugar-free cereal, tuna, protein bars, and fruit snacks. Volunteers stock shelves at a dozen drop-off points throughout Lincoln City. They also pick up donated food from various businesses and churches, purchase food using cash donations, pack the backpacks, and transport the filled packs to the schools.

"The Lincoln City community is doing amazing things," said Castillo, noting that within a year of its inception, the program grew from serving 10 to 12 students per week to helping more than 100 each week. "By ensuring that kids are not hungry, the program makes sure students can focus more on their studies."

Rinearson said the effort has extended throughout the north area, and is poised to move across the district. "The schools up there and the community are coming together more and more," he said. "That means things will only get better and better."

Backpacks for Kids is coordinated at Oceanlake Elementary School. Anyone with questions about the program, or those who would like to contribute time or money to the effort should call the school at 994-5296.

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