

GREENING YOUR SCHOOLS | BOLSTERING YOUR COMMUNITY | 2009 MAGNA AWARD WINNERS

American School

AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL • THE SOURCE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

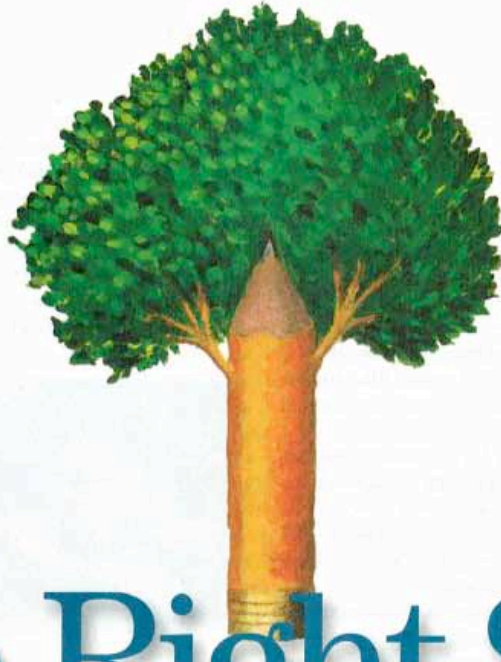
A massive federal stimulus plan is helping to narrow the gap in education funding, but in some struggling districts, it won't be enough

School finance focus

Money

Newsmaker:
Arne Duncan
discusses
schools, the
economy, and the
fate of No Child
Left Behind

APRIL 2009



The Right Stuff

Grand prize winners in the 2009 Magna Awards showcase school leaders' tenacity and innovation

Cecile S. Holmes

Enterprise, innovation, and a creative approach to best practices in public education are hallmarks of the three grand prize winners in the 2009 Magna Awards competition.

Sponsored by *American School Board Journal* with the support of Sodexo School Services, this year's top winners—Indiana's Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation, Oregon's Springfield Public Schools, and Washington state's Bridgeport School District—showcase the strength, tenacity, and resilience of school leaders.

The grand prize winners, who will receive \$4,000 each for their scholarship funds, were selected by an independent panel that culled through more than 340 applications. grand prize winners, winners, and honorable mention recipients were selected in three enrollment categories—under 5,000, 5,000 to 20,000, and over 20,000. All of the honorees are recognized in a special *ASBJ* supplement that accompanies this issue.

This year's top projects are diverse. They include a pro-

gram, targeted in part to the offspring of Latino farm workers, which offers college credit in high school and encourages students to pursue postsecondary education. Another grand prize winner effectively encourages literacy through book giveaways achieved through community partnerships. Yet another brings history alive by teaming local historians and community leaders with students.

Feel the History Evansville Vanderburgh School District Over 20,000 enrollment

Educators intent on bringing history into the digital age designed *Feel the History*, the project that won Evansville Vanderburgh the top prize for districts with more than 20,000 students.

Located in the urban confines of



Evansville, Ind., the district is faced with problems common in districts trying to better connect youth to local communities. The winning program was created to work within existing programs and projects.

Feel the History integrates the district's core curriculum with technology and community involvement to motivate young people to become real historians. In classes at F.J. Reitz High School, students create documentaries that are broadcast on the local public television station and hosted as podcasts on the local library website. Students produce the shows from start to finish: choosing the topics, researching them, taping audio and video, and scanning and editing during final production.

District leaders say the program keeps growing and succeeds because of strong partnerships with the community. Those partnerships include the Evansville mayor's office; the University of Southern Indiana; WNIN-TV; the Evansville Museum of Arts, History, and Science; local libraries; and two local historical societies.

Local historians chime in by serving as classroom mentors and as members of critical review teams, says Terry Hughes, a district specialist in integrating curriculum and technology. Each student-generated project is reviewed for technical professionalism and historical merit before it is released for public consumption.

Students work with Adobe Production Suites, software that also is used by professional filmmakers, to create the projects. A team of Feel the History students—2008 graduates Rick Yeager, Kourtney Bryant, Chris Deig, and Craig Austin—also won first place in the Adobe School Innovation Awards.

What began as one class for one year is now two classes taught over two years; students receive college credit in the second year. And Hughes says the students' projects have sparked some unusual responses.

In one instance, the students decided to look at a plane crash that killed the entire University of Evansville (UE) basketball team on Dec. 12, 1977. The 17-minute segment is posted on the Feel the History website (www.feelthehistory.com).

"UE had been a Division II powerhouse basketball program that moved to Division I" that year, Hughes says. "They hired a new coach and staff and recruited a whole team of Division I players. The plane carrying the coach and team to a basketball game crashed on takeoff from Evansville, killing everyone on board."

When production on the segment was finished, Hughes says the class received a number of e-mails about its work, titled "The Night It Rained Tears." One of the most touching comments came from Stafford Stephenson, a UE assistant basketball coach who had left earlier in the day on a separate recruiting/scouting trip. Stephenson learned of the crash the next morning in a newspaper.

"I happened to come upon your site yesterday and saw the segment," wrote Stephenson, who now lives in North Carolina. "It is impossible for me to express my feelings as I watched the film of our games or the footage of the players at the end of the segment. I never thought I would see the kids again beyond the team photo that hangs in my office today. May God bless all who contributed to this project and may He continue to bless all who were touched by 'The Night It Rained Tears.'"



Gift of Literacy **Springfield School District** **5,000 to 20,000 enrollment**

A community partnership and the school board's determination to increase literacy rates earned Oregon's Springfield Public Schools top Magna Award honors for districts with 5,000 to 20,000 students.

The Gift of Literacy project adopted by Springfield's school board embraces multiple goals—community engagement, dropout prevention, job skill training, and increased student achievement. It started in 2003 when more than 1,000 community residents identified raising literacy rates as a critical need.

"The Gift of Literacy program works to address this problem by placing books in the hands of children at an early age," says Nancy Bigley, chairwoman of the Springfield board.

The school board—collaborating with the Rotary Clubs of Springfield—approached a group of city agencies with the idea for Gift of Literacy, a program that encourages reading by getting books into children's hands and into school classrooms.

With a \$40,000 budget, the annual program exposes first-graders to a cross section of books. Each child is given his or her favorite book at a daylong reading celebration that is financed through community partnerships. Some 120 volunteers help distribute the books at the celebration and many offer to read them aloud to the children.

More than 50 percent of Springfield students live at or below the poverty level, school leaders say, noting low family incomes make it difficult for the children to develop

essential reading and writing skills. Students often are not able to read until first grade or later, which makes it difficult for them to meet state and national standards.

Bigley says the program can be duplicated easily and adapted by other districts with similar needs. In Springfield's case, the board provided the initial investment to start the program and works with local Rotary Clubs annually to raise necessary funds.

Gift of Literacy has expanded significantly since it started. The number of book titles offered to students has doubled from five to 10. A Spanish-language or bilingual book now is available and in-kind and cash donations have steadily increased, says Jeff DeFranco, the district's communications director.

"To date, nearly 3,000 students have been served through the Gift of Literacy program and nearly 4,000 books have been distributed throughout the Springfield community to students, libraries, and community organizations," DeFranco says. "In addition, Gift of Literacy adheres to the belief that literacy is a gateway skill—opening doors for students in other areas."

College in the High School

Bridgeport School District Under 5,000 enrollment

In Bridgeport, Wash., school leaders reasoned, if you can't get students to go to college, why not bring college to them? The Bridgeport School District's efforts earned it this year's top honor in the under 5,000 student category.

Other school districts have early college programs for high school students, but few districts that have them are as small as Bridgeport, which serves about 780 students in grades pre-k through 12. The College in the High School effort started in 2003 when the board approved two college-credit English classes for three students.

Superintendent Gene Schmidt says the board recognized the importance of making college classes accessible at the local level, especially in a rural district that has seen a "rapid and dramatic" demographic shift over the past decade. The board's goal was to build the program so more students—80 percent in the district are Hispanic—would pursue college degrees.

"As the size of apple orchards increased, the need for seasonal farm workers drew hundreds of families to the Bridgeport community. Many of these families arrived with little formal schooling," Schmidt says, noting that many of those new students struggled academically while working to learn English.



The board reasoned that introducing such a class for only three students was expensive but necessary. The hypothesis was that students who could experience high school success might develop the intellectual curiosity to enroll in other classes.

"The project partners high schools with universities, cross-trains teachers, and allows for a greater appreciation of the rigor of college-level programs," board member Tracy Zahn says.

In five years, College in the High School participation has exploded; in 2007-08, 108 students enrolled in college credit courses. Not bad for a high school with 182 students.

"Because our students are the sons and daughters of farm workers, students lacked the financial means to attend college. Some students were document-challenged and did not qualify for federal loans to attend college," Schmidt says. "The bleak scenario made college nothing more than an impossible dream for our students. Students seemed resigned to a future of following their parents back into the orchard."

Since 2003, one class has been expanded to an offering of courses that includes two composition and two literature English courses, as well as classes in biology, Spanish, psychology, music theory, history, government, microcomputers, accounting, keyboarding, and welding.

Principal Scott Sattler says the program "blows open the doors" to college for rural, low-income, minority students.

The school board negotiated with community colleges and the Advanced Placement board so students could receive college credit for academic and vocational courses. Board members also have ensured that adequate resources, including materials and supplies, are available for the classes. Staff members have received ongoing professional development.

The results are nothing short of astounding. Bridgeport has seen dramatic improvement in student scores on the Washington State Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). In 2003, only 59 percent of students in reading and 53 percent of students in writing met or exceeded the WASL requirement to graduate. All seniors met WASL requirements in 2007 and 2008, helping the district's high school to be named one of America's best by *U.S. News and World Report* last year.

Already the program is producing articulate, college-bound students such as high school senior Yesenia Ochoa.

Ochoa graduates this June with 25 college credits, an achievement she equates to receiving a \$7,500 scholarship. In the district, Ochoa says, the project has created a buzz among students that "college was cool." ■

Cecile S. Holmes (cileholmes@aol.com), a former newspaper reporter and editor, is an associate professor at the University of South Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communication.