

Feb. 12, 2007

EDUCATION

Ferndale High students find advocates

Grants pay 3 people to help kids pass WASL

MARY LANE GALLAGHER
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

FAMILY MEETINGS

Ferndale High School will host two meetings this week intended to encourage students' families to get involved in their kids' academic efforts:

ROCK THE WASL: A meeting to launch this year's campaign to generate support for students as they take the Washington Assessment of Student Learning is at 3 p.m. today at the school cafeteria.

LATINO PARENT MEETING: An "Open Agenda" conversation for parents to talk with school officials about their concerns and ideas about their kids' education will be at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday in the school cafeteria.

FERNDALE — Peter Kaynor keeps fortune cookies in his Ferndale High School office to help students stay on track.

Shannon O'Brien takes walks with kids.

Kaynor and O'Brien and two other Ferndale High School staff members use casual conversations and quiet heart-to-hearts, calls home and community gatherings to help students succeed in school.

Their titles vary depending on which grant funds their salaries. But their jobs are the same — to act as human spackle, sealing the cracks large enough for students to fall through in the county's biggest high school.

"I get to (do) what teachers don't have time, sometimes, to do," Kaynor said: "Follow up on attendance, follow up on poor work habits, unorganized binders, family issues that go on at home and affect school."

Ferndale High officials hope efforts to offer a more personalized experience will help more kids pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, a fast-approaching graduation requirement for this year's junior class.

As family coordinator for the school's Early College Program — an intensive academic program for American Indian, Hispanic and low-income students who would often be first in their family to go to college — it's Kaynor's job to help keep families up to date on how students are doing.

He also keeps track of the students themselves. When kids stop by his office to munch on a fortune cookie, Kaynor takes the opportunity to chat and look up their grades. "I'm their advocate," Kaynor

said. "I don't punish them the same way a vice principal will. I can just sit there and listen."

Ferndale High School has received two grants to have more student advocates like Kaynor on campus, outside the Early College Program. O'Brien is the school's student assistance coordinator, supervising the afterschool tutoring program and working with the students who attend.

"I walk with them at lunch and ask them, 'What's getting in the way?'" O'Brien said. "Sometimes it's family. Sometimes it's a pencil. Sometimes it's breakfast. Sometimes it's health. We identify the barriers, then we brainstorm potential resources. Usually, the students know what those are."

O'Brien's position is paid for with a federal grant promoting "smaller learning communities." The school is also the recipient of a state grant targeting the gap in test scores between white students and students of color. The Parent, Community, School Partnership Project pays for two community liaisons, Alvaro Vicente to work with Hispanic kids, and Shelly Vendiola to work with American Indian kids. Both work with students who haven't passed the Washington Assessment of Student Learning.

The liaisons work with students "who sometimes float through the middle, who don't always get the support they need," said Ferndale High School Principal Dawn Fairchild. "They might not have passed the WASL, or they may be struggling in other ways with their grades, but they're trying and they want to be successful."

That connection with another adult in school can make a big difference to a kid who's struggling, said O'Brien.

"Students admit to me they perform better in those classrooms where they know the teacher really cares," she said.

Parents appreciate the friendly approach, too, said Barb O'Brine, whose son Ben worked with Shannon O'Brien when she was the family coordinator in the Early College Program. Barb O'Brine, a baker, remembers a friendly conversation that started when Shannon O'Brien called to order pies.

"Ben was just not working up to his potential. I knew that, too," Barb O'Brine remembers. "We got to talking and she said, 'What can we do to make this a better situation?' It was kind of comfortable, the way she did it, instead of calling up, 'Your kid needs some help! What's going on here?'"

Working with Shannon O'Brien has helped Barb O'Brine feel more comfortable standing her ground at home on academic issues.

"It's such a fine line when they're in high school, because you want them to have independence and be responsible for themselves," she said. "On the other hand, you don't want to just leave it up to them because they do need the accountability."

Ben, now the school's student body president, still struggles at times to balance his school and student government priorities. But sometimes just one look from Shannon O'Brien could encourage him to hit the books.

"She knew when we would try and lie to her," the 18-year-old said. "She's got that skill. She looks at you and you know you did something wrong. She's got that way of making you want to do it."



Copyright ©2006 The Bellingham Herald

All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution or retransmission of any of the contents

of this service without the express written consent of The Bellingham Herald is expressly prohibited.

The Bellingham Herald. 1155 N. State. St., Bellingham, WA 98225, Phone (360) 676-2600.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#) | [About The Bellingham Hera](#)

View this article online at: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/102/story/48635.html>