

Without the layering effect of advocacy circles, you run the risk of burning out your teachers, Malsam believes. The advocacy initiative allows teachers to teach because parents and staff are quickly engaged on behalf of students who need extra support.

#### UPHOLDING TRADITION

There are many ways to tell the story of Lewis and Clark High School. It is a school with a proud history, including the recent renovation, a cadre of loyal alumni, strong AP programs, a valuable art collection, and an auditorium and pipe organ that are valued community resources.

As Swett tours the building he is obviously proud of all that. But he is looking forward to writing a new chapter of LCHS history. He cites increasing enrollment in a part of Spokane that is not growing. It is the most diverse high school in the city and is a school of choice for many students and their parents.

High expectations are as real here as the freeway just outside the school door. “We have to be good stewards of our reputation,” concludes Paula Ronhaar.

#### THE NUMBERS

|                              |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| Grades                       | 9–12  |
| Total students               | 2,028 |
| Racial/ethnic make-up        |       |
| White                        | 85%   |
| African American             | 6%    |
| Hispanic                     | 3%    |
| Native American              | 3%    |
| Asian                        | 4%    |
| Free and reduced-price lunch | 26%   |
| Staff                        |       |
| Teachers                     | 101   |
| Administrators               | 5     |
| Counselors                   | 4.5   |
| Support staff                | 44    |



# 5.

## CLASSROOMS WITHOUT WALLS

**In Montana’s Bitterroot Valley, one high school uses experiential learning to encourage lifelong learners.**

*By Bracken Reed*

CORVALLIS, Montana—In the summer of 2000, much of the Bitterroot Valley went up in flames. Beginning in mid-July and continuing unabated until the rains of September finally allowed firefighters to regain control, wildfires blazed throughout the valley. In the end, more than 356,000 acres of private, state, and federal land had burned. More than 500 families were evacuated from their homes—many staying in emergency shelters set up in local schools—and a total of 75 homes were destroyed.

By the beginning of the school year in September, with smoke still lingering and ashes still cooling, teachers at Corvallis High School had hatched a plan to draw on these traumatic experiences. Trevor Laboski, along with his fellow science teachers, designed a class that would take students out into the field to study the effects of the fire on the Mill Creek and Bear Creek drainages—two particularly hard-hit areas on the west side of the valley, within the Corvallis School District’s boundaries.

Now in its fourth year, the project continues to involve students in a hands-on, field-based study of the effects of the fire on long-term water quality, soil erosion, and plant recovery in the area. Students visit the creek sites twice a year, develop an understanding of the scientific methods for studying water quality, and share their findings with the U.S. Forest Service. But more important, students are exposed to the idea that learning can be challenging, practical, and powerfully relevant to their lives all at the same time. As Laboski says, “You don’t have to get buy-in from students with this kind of project; it’s already there. What could be more relevant than something that just drove you out of your house?”

At Corvallis High, this was no one-time undertaking. Educational projects involving hands-on, active student involvement—much of it outside the classroom—are a staple. While many schools incorporate a project-based approach into their curriculum, few work as hard as Corvallis at making sure those projects are part of a rigorous and coherent curriculum that is closely aligned to state standards.

Principal Sarah Schumacher gives her staff a lot of freedom to pursue their passions, but she is also a hard-nosed realist who demands results. And the results are there for everyone to see: Corvallis students have consistently performed well in all areas of the state’s Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) and are particularly strong in science, with close to 90 percent meeting the proficient or advanced level in each of the last three years.

### TAKING IT OUTSIDE

Several staff members point to the dynamic leadership of Schumacher and the messianic zeal of long-time English teacher Art Rzasa for spreading the philosophy of experiential learning throughout the school.

Rzasa, called “the guru of authentic outcomes” by one of his fellow teachers, has been walking his talk for over a decade—or rather, hiking his talk, often at an elevation of 11,000 feet. Every summer Rzasa leads a group of 10 sophomores and juniors on a 30-mile backpacking trip into alpine wilderness.

The program, called Classroom Without Walls, is now in its 11th year and is the epitome of the Corvallis philosophy: It gives students ownership of their educational experience; it’s cross-curricular; it incorporates the beautiful Montana landscape; it produces practical, “authentic” outcomes that

can be used by others; and it is supported by a large number of outside agencies and businesses.

Students apply for the program in January, and the eight-day trip takes place the following July. In between, students incorporate language arts, science, and social studies into a thorough, meaningful study of the place they will visit. Each student is required to create a specific lesson plan that culminates in a peer teaching session and the creation of audiovisual teaching materials that can be used in other district classrooms. While on the trip itself, they’re required to haul a 40-pound pack, cook their own meals, and camp in tents in places like the Beartooth Mountains, the Wind River Range, and the Sawtooths—beautiful, rugged wilderness areas that form the most breathtaking classrooms one can imagine.

It’s an experience that calls out to anyone who has ever stared out a window during sophomore social studies, stricken with spring fever and daydreaming about the freedom of the great outdoors, while a well-meaning but uninspiring teacher drones on about names and dates that will be on the next test.

### DRIVEN BY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

One gets the sense that Art Rzasa was just such a student himself, and that his own experience as a nontraditional student, alienated by traditional lecture-based teaching practices, motivates him to share the power of experiential learning with all who will listen.

At Corvallis, he has found a receptive audience in many of his fellow teachers, and a principal who fully supports his efforts. Schumacher, a former English teacher at Corvallis, has been here since 1978 and has helped turn the school into a haven for passionate, adventurous teachers, who aren’t afraid to think outside traditional teaching boundaries or take their students outside the building.

“I believe that kids need to be treated with dignity and respect,” says Schumacher. “That needs to be a core value. And part of that is that they need to have teachers who are exceptional people—people who have passions and interests of their own, as well as a passion for teaching and for their subject area.”

### A DIVERGENT FLOCK

During Schumacher’s time as principal, the town and school district have grown tremendously. One result has been the creation of several new teaching positions at the school, which has allowed her to put her beliefs into action.

#### THE NUMBERS

|                               |      |
|-------------------------------|------|
| Grades                        | 9–12 |
| Total students                | 480  |
| Racial/ethnic make-up         |      |
| White                         | 97%  |
| African American              | <1%  |
| Hispanic                      | 1%   |
| Native American               | 1%   |
| Asian                         | <1%  |
| Free and reduced-price lunch: | 37%  |
| Staff                         |      |
| Teachers                      | 34   |
| Administrators                | 4    |
| Counselors                    | 1.5  |
| Support staff                 | 2    |



## THINGS THAT WORK AT CORVALLIS

Empowering students to take control of their own learning by offering hands-on, experiential, project-based learning opportunities is the foundation of the school's curriculum. There are many exciting projects happening at the school, all of which share some common traits: They are long term; they are research driven; they include a wide variety of assessments, including student portfolios and presentations; they involve collaborations and partnerships with outside agencies; and they result in authentic outcomes that can be shared with others. They also have full district and principal support.

Here's a sampling:

### The Riparian Monitoring Project

The post-fire stream monitoring project (see main article) was a spin-off of this long-term project, which is spearheaded by Jim Striebel, a 2004 Radio Shack National Teacher Award winner. Working in collaboration with the nearby Teller Wildlife Refuge (TWR), Striebel's science students are part of a "stream team" that tests the water quality of several east valley creeks. The project involves the freshman physical science class, the sophomore biology class, and the junior chemistry class, and incorporates stream monitoring into the normal classroom curriculum. Students collect data in the spring and fall, compare it with previous years, and share it with the TWR and the U.S. Forest

Service. The data are valuable in monitoring the effectiveness of riparian habitat restoration efforts on the refuge.

### The Calf Creek Elk Project

Led by science teacher Trevor Laboski, this project involves the monitoring of deer and elk activity on a winter game range in the nearby Sapphire Mountains. Students visit the area twice a year, creating "transects": marked-off areas of 100 to 200 feet each. The students then give a detailed report of everything they find within that transect. "The object is to give an accurate snapshot of the carrying capacity of the area," says Laboski. "In other words: How many elk can this place support?" Students then share these data with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

### The Montana Heritage Project

This long-term project is a yearlong, cross-curricular course involving the English and geography departments, and is led by Phil Leonardi. Each year the project focuses on a different era of Montana history. Students conduct oral interviews with long-time community members, create audiovisual materials that are given to the local historical museum at the end of the year, and search primary documents such as census records and archives. Students also go to the state capitol in Helena once a year to give presentations on their findings.

"I didn't want to hire sheep," says Schumacher. "I didn't want to hire people who were easy to lead, necessarily, but people who had divergent ideas. So I looked at both offerings: curricular as well as other things they could bring into the mix of the school that would include more kids in extracurricular or cocurricular activities. I want the school to be a dynamic rather than a static place."

The end result, says geography teacher Phil Leonardi, has been exactly that. "This is a very dynamic place, with talented, creative people. Sarah encourages people to integrate all aspects of their lives into their teaching and to teach to their passions. For me, it's reinvigorated my career. It's given a meaning and a sense of purpose to my job."

It's the kind of statement one hears often at Corvallis High School, from teachers and students alike. In the end, what people take beyond the classroom walls here is the most valuable experience of all: the sense of being a passionate, lifelong learner. ■



Courtesy of Corvallis High