

NORTHWEST EDUCATION

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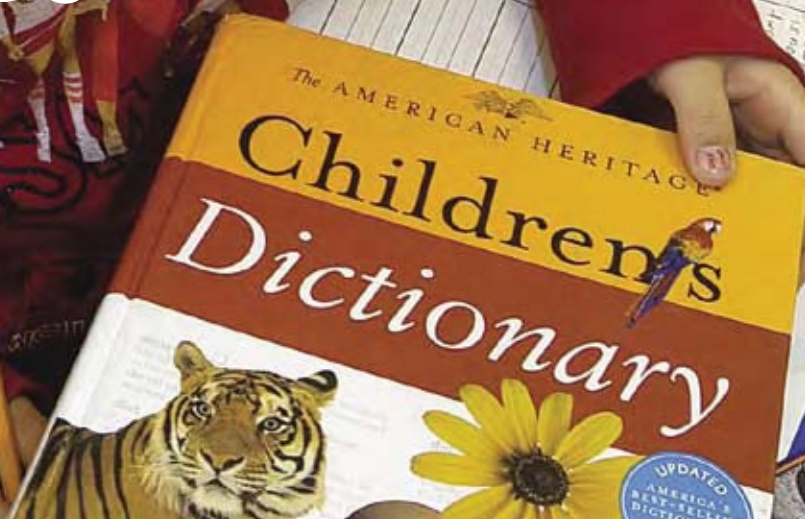
Focused instruction 10

Strong leadership 18

Sustained change 24

NORTHWEST TURNAROUNDS

HOW FIVE SCHOOLS
MADE BIG JUMPS IN
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



FEATURES

6 **Turning Around Chronically Underperforming Schools**

This brief introduction to the topic looks at supporting data for our five Northwest turnaround schools.

10 **A Second Chance at Success**

Intervention classes and dedicated teachers turn around more than just test scores at a western Idaho middle school.

14 **Going the Distance**

A strong leader and an emphasis on reading bring big gains in proficiency at a multicultural Anchorage, Alaska, elementary school.

18 **Lessons From a Turnaround Specialist**

An experienced and dynamic principal helps an Oregon high school focus on its most pressing needs first.

24 **The Long Turnaround**

At an elementary school in Roundup, Montana, recent double-digit jumps in student achievement are the payoff for a long-term improvement strategy.

28 **Quick Wins and Long-Term Sustainability**

Sam Redding, a coauthor of the Institute of Education Sciences practice guide, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, gives the concept of “turnarounds” a national perspective.

30 **The Personal Approach**

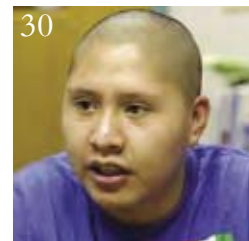
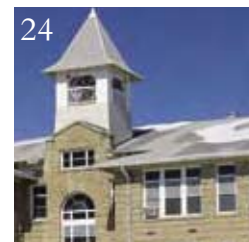
A supportive and personalized environment transforms a struggling high school in north central Washington into a blue-ribbon winner.

➤ **Believing in Kids: How One High-Poverty Elementary Found a Way To Boost Proficiency**

Teri Wagner, principal of Lapwai Elementary School on the Nez Perce Indian Reservation, talks about the school’s long-term, systemic change.

➤ **Supporting Statewide School Improvement: An Interview With NWREL Experts**

Two experts from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s Center for School and District Improvement talk about state-level technical assistance.



The Personal Approach

A small resort town in north central Washington focuses on strong relationships to improve student achievement.

Story by JACQUELINE RAPHAEL
Photos by RICHARD ULHORN

CHELAN, Washington—It’s the start of the school year. A senior student and his mother are meeting with Chelan High School principal Barry DePaoli in his office. The student is not on track to graduate.

“Francisco, let me tell you my dream,” the mother says to her son. “My dream is to see you in your cap and gown on the stage.”

DePaoli smiles at the student. “Your mother loves you more than anybody else in the world. Now you know her dream. If that doesn’t motivate you, something’s wrong.”

The student nods, and DePaoli goes to work. He arranges for additional tutoring and instructional support from Francisco’s teachers. He suggests to classified staff that they show a personal interest in Francisco. And he gives Francisco his cell phone number and tells him to call when he needs access to the school’s computer lab.

“He’s been working here many weekends,” says DePaoli, several months later. “With that level of commitment, I think he’s going to cross the line.” He glances up at the poster on his wall, filled with individual portraits of all 393 Chelan High School students.

“The reason I come to work every day,” he adds, “is to make sure each and every one of those students shakes my hand at graduation.”

Chelan’s personalized approach to education has produced impressive academic results. In 2008, it was one of four

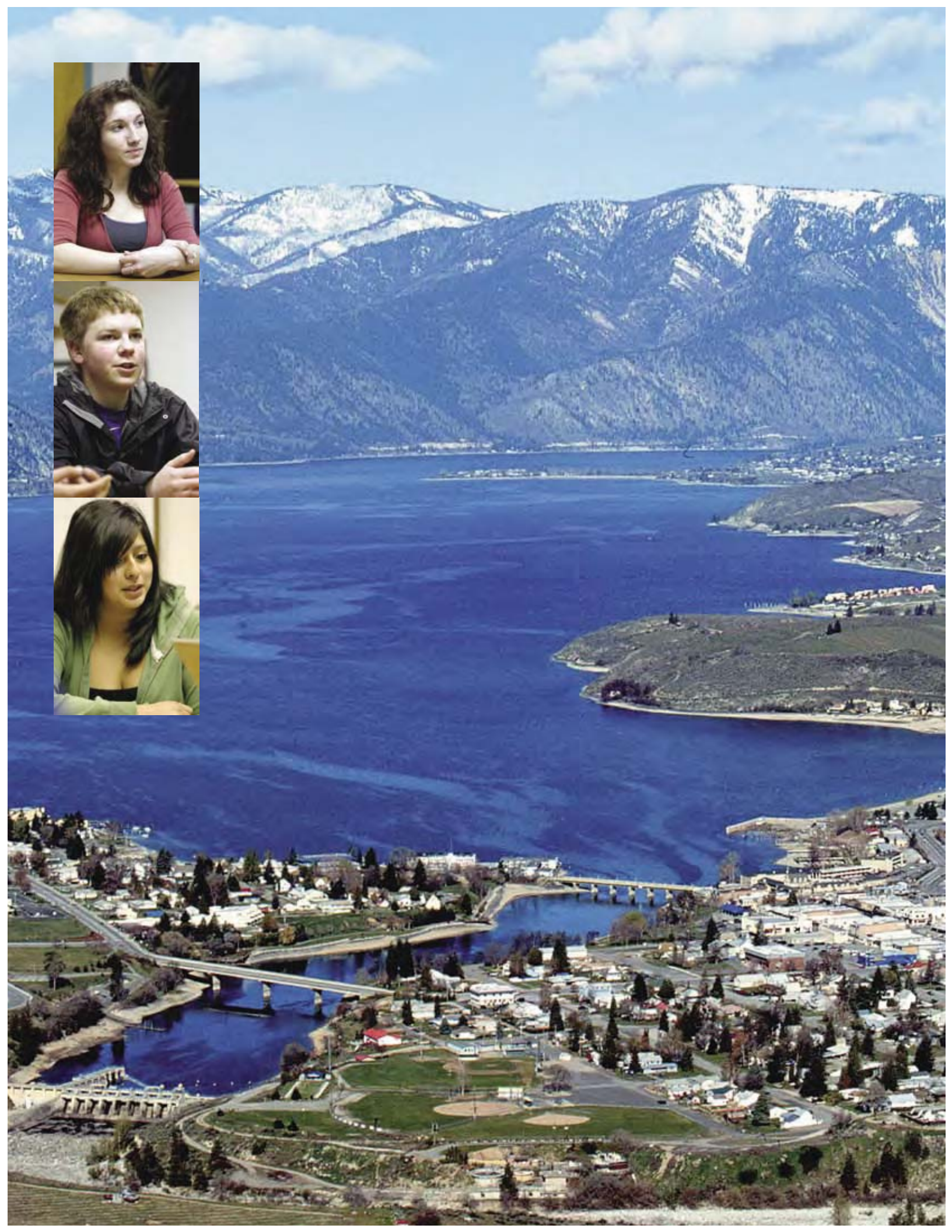
Washington schools to be recognized as a national Blue Ribbon School for its dramatic student achievement gains. Three years ago, only 42 percent of its 10th-graders passed the math test, 54 percent passed the writing test, and 63 percent passed the reading test. Last year, 62 percent passed math, 80 percent passed writing, and 87 percent passed reading. Compared to schools with similar demographics, Chelan High School ranks among the highest performing schools in the state.

School staff members at Chelan don’t feel they “turned around” by adopting a new instructional program—although they did that. They believe it was their slow and steady progress toward building a positive, supportive, and personalized school environment that is now coming to fruition.

A Close-Knit School Community

Scenic Chelan, with 3,800 residents, sits at the tip of Lake Chelan, a gorgeous 50-mile long, 1,500-foot deep lake filled with pristine, glacier-fed water. Nestled beside Washington’s Cascade Mountains and surrounded by apple orchards and wineries, its many visitors enjoy abundant year-round recreational opportunities, including boating, fishing, skiing, and golf.

As in many resort communities, a division of sorts exists in Chelan: Some of its residents own the resorts, apple orchards, and wineries, while others work in the service industry that is connected to those industries. At the high school, too, the student body is divided: 40 percent of the students are Hispanic, and most of the rest are white. About half are eligible for free and reduced-price meals.



Students say that those differences don't matter and have not divided their school.

"We're all mixed up together," says Cindy Avila, a senior and vice president of Associated Student Body (ASB) student government. "There's a real closeness among us."

"I know there are student groups, but they're ... blurry," says senior Rachel Yaun, who will speak on behalf of her class in English at the upcoming graduation, while Dia Galvan will speak in Spanish. "We can talk to anyone. People are really open."

"We're pretty small and tightly knit," adds junior Derek Brunner.

About eight years ago, staff from Chelan's elementary, middle, and high school started working together more closely. The school district began to examine instruction across all grade levels, identifying and filling in holes. In reading, curricula were aligned to strongly emphasize reading comprehension skills. In math, the district undertook a curriculum mapping process that brought increased academic rigor and consistency to instruction, particularly in the elementary grades. The district also started to replace retiring teachers with instructors who were gifted at connecting with students on a personal level. Slowly, test scores started climbing.

On the Students' Level

Because of the school's emphasis on personalization, staff members rarely stay secluded in their classrooms or offices. Instead, they are often in the cafeteria asking students about their jobs and future plans. Or, they're supervising an after-school club or extracurricular activity, or coaching a sport. Teachers also makes themselves eminently available to students.

"Everyone I know has their teacher's home number, and it's okay to call them at night or on the weekends," says Yaun. This is not an isolated circumstance: Students say most of the teachers, administrators, and classified staff spend time well beyond school hours helping students in one way or another.

Teachers also work hard at engaging students in their learning.

"They switch it up all the time," says Yaun. In her English class, students are "reading one day, dancing the next."

"We reenacted a Greek play in a park," adds Avila, who's in the same class. "Most of our classes aren't just 'sit down and do your work' classes."

These students may be responding to Chelan's implementation of a research-based instructional approach called Powerful Teaching and Learning (PTL), designed to mitigate the effects of poverty. Developed by Duane Baker and others at Seattle Pacific University, PTL strategies include scaffolding instruction, flexible grouping, cooperative learning, project-based learning, and service-learning. The program complements Chelan's personalization efforts perfectly.

Steve Bovingdon, the English department chair and a PTL coach for the district, says it has transformed his teaching: "PTL suggests that if you don't have strong relationships with students, you're not going to get a high level of student learning. At Chelan, we have a building full of people who care very deeply about students."

DePaoli is especially well-known for the respectful and caring way he conducts his relationships with students and staff. By the time he became principal in 2008, he knew the Chelan school community well, having served as a teacher, middle school principal for five years, and combined middle/high school principal for two years. His first priority was to establish trust throughout the building.

Rarely do high school students become effusive about a principal, but DePaoli gets high marks.

Previous page: Students Victoria Wright, Derek Brunner, and Cindy Avila identify what they like best about Chelan's unique personalized approach to education. The Lake Chelan Valley in central Washington state encompasses the communities of Chelan, Manson, and Stehekin. This page: (left) Principal Barry DePaoli; (below) math teacher Ken Barnes works with a student.



“Not only does he know every student in the building,” says senior Annalise Nelson, “but he knows their class schedules and their parents’ names.”

According to senior and ASB president Victoria Wright, DePaoli is a unique school leader who doesn’t expect the students’ respect simply because he’s the principal.

“He really works at getting on our level, talking to each student one-on-one,” she says. “He’s a lot more like a friend than a principal.”

“Even students who don’t do well academically respect Mr. DePaoli,” says Brunner. “He’s always striving for new ways to get students interested in what they’re doing here. I don’t really know what it is he does, but he sure does his job well.”

Math teacher Ken Barnes says even when DePaoli brings students into his office to suspend them, “By the time they leave, they’re feeling pretty good about themselves.”

DePaoli admits he often gives a ride home to students he has had to expel.

“If you respect students, even when you’re disciplining them, you give them an opportunity to improve. I learned this working at the alternative school.”

Empowered To Raise Expectations

Slowly, over time, Chelan High School’s focus on personalization created fertile ground for new ideas among the staff. As teachers began trusting themselves and their influence on students, they became more likely to take risks in order to help students succeed. They began using Chelan’s positive, supportive environment to challenge all students, on a highly personal level, to succeed academically—and then the teachers started making it happen.

Nowhere is that more clear than in the math department, which holds high expectations for itself and the students. Each of its three instructors teaches a full course load, teaching at all math levels, and puts in countless extra hours before and after school. Each coaches a sport. One already has National Board certification and the other two are in the process.

“We’re all pretty tired at the end of the day,” says Marty Rothlisberger, in his eighth year at Chelan. When Rothlisberger first arrived, he spent a lot of time with Ken Barnes, trying to figure out how to help students perform better on the statewide assessment.

“We didn’t accept that some kids would do well and others wouldn’t,” he says, noting that all three math teachers get genuinely frustrated if every student in the school doesn’t excel in math.

Newcomer Tom Robinson, in his second year at Chelan, says that at this school—unlike larger ones—teachers think more about the connections among their individual courses.

“You can teach to get students through the course you’re teaching them, or you can teach to make them successful at what’s coming down the road,” says Robinson. “Here, we all work hard to understand what students will be expected to do in the next course. If I teach my students Algebra I, I want to know what Marty expects of them in Geometry, and Ken in

Algebra II. I don’t just want them to get through algebra.”

The math department combines a strong personal investment in student success with the belief that all students can meet high standards. On a small scale, Rothlisberger demonstrated this a year ago after he noticed some students weren’t completing homework. With DePaoli’s approval, he sent their parents a letter offering to stay after school with these students until they finished their homework. That small but significant innovation, says DePaoli, changed many student and parent attitudes.

Another innovation that has helped many students go further in their math coursework started with one teacher’s data analysis project for National Board certification. The teachers observed that although the department had offered a number of remedial classes over the years, the failure rate was high, and students weren’t really benefiting. So, the teachers came up with a new system: They eliminated all remedial classes and put all freshmen, including struggling students, into Algebra I.

The results still surprise them. Many of the students pass and earn full credit. Some fail, but often these students were failing the remedial classes, too. Others make progress but do not fully meet the standard, so the math teachers designed a system in which they give those students “basic algebra” credit, similar to a prealgebra credit.

“The students end up way ahead of where they would have been with a remedial class,” says Rothlisberger.

“And, they’ve spent the year surrounded by high-achieving peers, exposed to high-level instruction,” adds Barnes. Some of the students are able to retake the course and pass, yielding a much higher success rate than the remedial track did. “They come in with more confidence,” says Barnes. “The first three chapters are pretty easy for them because they’ve seen it all before. That gets their momentum going.”

These teachers don’t look at the state test to measure the results of their experiment. Instead, they point to the fact that eight years ago it was a struggle to get 10 students into Precalculus, but last year 50 took it and 23 went on to take Calculus.

“We take these kids who have struggled with math before and we give them hope,” says Barnes. “We have a real ‘you can do this’ attitude.”

Over time, Chelan has become a school with “a ton of teachers who care about kids, who make them feel valued,” says Rothlisberger. “And now all the test scores—in reading and math—have gone up. It takes the whole staff to pull something like that off.”

DePaoli puts it this way: “If you were to ask me what makes this such a good school today, I’d say it’s the combination of extremely dedicated professionals who are good at their craft, and a really positive and supportive building culture.” ■