

Oregon Small Schools Association News



A Voice for Small Schools

The Oregon Small Schools Association is a nonprofit organization of small schools who have the common goal of ensuring their interests are heard in Salem and in the larger education community.



May 2025

Patrick Clarke Named OSSA 2025 Teacher of the Year



The Oregon Small Schools Association (OSSA) is pleased to announce that Patrick Clarke, a teacher at Siletz Valley Charter School in Lincoln County, has been named the 2025 Teacher of the Year. Clarke's unique approach to education, blending his experiences as an army cook with a passion for teaching cultural traditions through food, has had a lasting impact on his students and community.

Clarke has transformed a simple food service program into a comprehensive culinary curriculum that teaches students to grow, harvest, prepare, and serve a variety of foods, all while celebrating the cultural significance of food. Ginger Redlinger, Superintendent/Principal of Siletz Valley Schools, praised Clarke's work, saying, "Patrick has a vision that addresses the needs of everyone, from children to elders, understanding that good food brings families together."

His work in the Siletz tribal community has earned him the respect of local tribal members, who have invited him to share his expertise in preparing food for ceremonial events. As Redlinger highlighted, Clarke's program goes beyond cooking; it connects students with their cultural heritage and fosters a deeper appreciation for food as a cultural gift.

"I am humbled and honored to receive this award," said Clarke. "I am surrounded by incredible colleagues and students who inspire me every day to be my best."

Clarke's dedication to his students, community, and cultural heritage exemplifies the values OSSA seeks in its Teacher of the Year. The award recognizes educators who demonstrate integrity, leadership, commitment to community, scholarship, and student achievement.

Clarke was honored with the Teacher of the Year award at the OSSA Spring Conference, held on April 18, 2025, at the Salishan Resort.

OSSA Names Michelle Eagleson 2025 Principal of the Year



The Oregon Small Schools Association (OSSA) is proud to announce that Mrs. Michelle Eagleson, Principal of Vernonia Elementary School, has been named the 2025 Principal of the Year. Mrs. Eagleson was honored for her exceptional leadership and unwavering dedication to her school community. Each year, OSSA recognizes a principal who demonstrates excellence in leadership, commitment to the community, and a strong focus on student achievement. The OSSA Board of Directors is pleased to recognize Mrs. Eagleson's outstanding contributions to education.

With over 30 years of service to Vernonia Elementary, Mrs. Eagleson has guided her school through significant challenges, including two catastrophic floods that disrupted the education of hundreds of students and staff. Her steadfast leadership during these crises ensured that the students' educational needs were met, even when their learning environments were displaced. She also played a vital role in supporting the social-emotional well-being of her students and staff, organizing teams to ensure that the school's core values of safety and well-being remained at the forefront.

Dr. Jim Helmen, Superintendent of the Vernonia School District, spoke highly of her leadership: "Michelle has been a beacon of resilience and innovation at Vernonia Elementary. She has transformed the school into a place where students are excited to learn and parents trust that their children are thriving in a safe and nurturing environment. Michelle's leadership has set a high bar for what is possible in small schools across Oregon."

Mrs. Eagleson was presented with the Principal of the Year award during the OSSA Spring Conference at Salishan Resort on April 18, 2025.

Recognize Excellence—Nominate the Next OSSA Superintendent of the Year by May 19

Each year, OSSA honors one exceptional school administrator who exemplifies integrity, leadership, and dedication to Oregon's small and rural school communities. Last year's honoree, Mr. Todd Miller, Superintendent of Santiam Canyon School District, was recognized for his remarkable leadership over 11 years, including launching a preschool program, passing a bond to

build a new state-of-the-art 7–12 school, leading post-wildfire recovery efforts, and helping unify his community through the “Canyon Strong” campaign. Mr. Miller’s mentorship and collaborative spirit continue to inspire leaders across the LBL ESD region.

We invite you to help recognize another outstanding superintendent this year. Submit your nomination by May 19 to honor those whose leadership is making a difference in Oregon’s small schools.

Attached is the Nomination process for the Oregon Small Schools

Send nominations to carter.michael@lakeview.k12.or.us

Meet Dandy Stevens: New Board Chair of the Oregon Small Schools Association



“Serving on the Oregon Small Schools Association has been an incredibly rewarding experience. Small schools are the heart of our rural communities—places where students are known, cared for, and given unique opportunities to grow. I value the tight-knit environment, the innovation that comes from necessity, and the deep relationships that define small school culture. It’s an honor to be part of a group that uplifts voices from across the state and works to ensure that every student, no matter their zip code, has access to a high-quality education.”

Dandy Stevens has served as the Superintendent of Gervais School District for the past six years, bringing a wealth of experience and leadership to the role. With a career in education spanning 32 years, she has dedicated her professional life to fostering student success, strengthening school communities, and advocating for the resources schools need to thrive.

Before joining Gervais School District, Dandy spent much of her career in the Silver Falls School District, where she held various administrative positions, including Assistant Superintendent. Throughout her tenure, she has always strived to create an environment where both students and educators could excel.

Dandy's journey in education began with four years of teaching overseas, an experience that broadened her perspective on global education and reinforced her commitment to equitable learning opportunities for all students. Her passion for education has remained steadfast throughout her career, whether in the classroom, at the district level, or in advocating for policy changes that directly impact students and staff.

The most challenging yet rewarding endeavor of her career has been educating the community on the importance of modern, safe, and well-equipped school facilities. Leading efforts to pass a general obligation bond, she worked tirelessly to communicate the district's needs, engage stakeholders, and build community support for critical infrastructure improvements.

As a dedicated leader, Dandy remains committed to ensuring that every student in Gervais School District has access to a high-quality education, supported by strong leadership, effective policies, and the resources necessary for success.

Meet James L. Helmen: New Vice Chair of the Oregon Small Schools Association



"Serving on the OSSA Board is an extension of my core belief that every school in Oregon, regardless of size or location, has the power to make a profound impact. Small schools, in particular, are not lesser; they are often leaner, required to be more agile, and deeply rooted in their communities. While each school may face different challenges, we all share a common mission: to innovate boldly, lead collaboratively, and ensure that every student in Oregon has access to an education that gives them a chance to fulfill their dreams, no matter their ZIP code."

The Oregon Small Schools Association proudly announces that James L. Helmen, Ed.S., Superintendent of Vernonia School District, has been selected for a leadership position on the OSSA Board.

With over 20 years of experience in public education, Superintendent Helmen has led with a steadfast commitment to academic achievement, equity, innovation, and student-centered

systems. Throughout his career, he has consistently advanced instructional quality and student outcomes in small, rural districts, demonstrating that size is no barrier to excellence.

As Superintendent of Vernonia School District since 2022, Helmen has guided the district in surpassing Oregon Department of Education benchmarks in graduation rates, early literacy, and student attendance. Under his leadership, the district earned recognition from Renaissance Learning for exceptional reading growth and was highlighted by ODE as a model for K–5 literacy and writing achievement.

Helmen brings deep expertise in IDEA, ADA, and Title IX compliance, strategic budgeting, and program innovation, including expanding Career and Technical Education (CTE), creating Tier III behavioral frameworks, and developing mentorship systems that support early-career educators. His leadership is grounded in evidence-based practices from thought leaders like John Hattie, Mike Schmoker, and Doug Lemov.

Beyond academics, Helmen is a champion for community engagement. He has expanded stakeholder participation through town halls, student forums, and family outreach initiatives, building a strong culture of trust and collaboration.

Helmen resides in Clatskanie, Oregon, with his wife Amy and daughter, Solana. Outside of his work in education, he values time with family, volunteering in his community, and mentoring other rural school leaders.

Meet Ginger Redlinger: New Board Member of the Oregon Small Schools Association



The Oregon Small Schools Association (OSSA) proudly welcomes Ginger Redlinger, Superintendent of Siletz Valley Schools, to its Board of Directors representing Region 4, which includes Coos, Curry, Douglas, Jackson, and Josephine counties.

With a distinguished career in Oregon education, Redlinger has served in various leadership roles,

including her tenure as Superintendent of North Marion School District, where she was recognized for her insights on staffing challenges in rural districts.

Before joining Siletz, Ginger Redlinger led two innovative charter schools in the Oregon City and Oregon Trail districts. At the Clackamas Academy of Industrial Sciences (CAIS), she partnered with industry to offer hands-on training in manufacturing and trades. She also directed a Mandarin immersion school with ties to China, helping to build a globally focused curriculum. These roles highlight her commitment to expanding student opportunities through creative, community-based education.

At Siletz Valley Schools, Redlinger is known for her commitment to culturally responsive education and community engagement. She has supported initiatives that honor local traditions, such as the culinary program led by Patrick Clarke, which integrates food education with cultural practices .

Redlinger's dedication to small schools and rural communities makes her a valuable addition to the OSSA Board, where she will advocate for the unique needs and strengths of Oregon's small schools and districts.

Meet Robert Medley: New Board Member of the Oregon Small Schools Association



The Oregon Small Schools Association is proud to welcome Robert Medley, Superintendent of Harney County School District No. 3, as one of the newest members on the OSSA Board of Directors.

Since becoming superintendent in 2023, Robert has been a strong advocate for rural education and student-centered leadership. He previously served as principal at Burns High School and held administrative roles in the Scappoose School District. His experience spans both instructional leadership and community engagement, key strengths that align with OSSA's mission to support Oregon's small and rural schools.

"It's an honor to join the OSSA Board and represent the voices of rural educators and communities," Medley said. "I look forward to working with fellow leaders to strengthen opportunities for students across Oregon."

We are excited to have Robert's perspective and leadership on the board and look forward to the valuable contributions he will bring to our statewide work.

2025 OSSA Annual Conference Recap: Small Schools, Big Impact



This year's OSSA Annual Conference brought together small school leaders from across Oregon for a dynamic and meaningful gathering focused on connection, collaboration, and shared learning. With a strong turnout and positive energy throughout the event, attendees praised the conference's intimate setting, which allowed for deep conversations, individual interaction, and easy networking.

Participants especially appreciated the presence and engagement of Dr. Charlene Williams, Director of the Oregon Department of Education, who attended and actively participated throughout the conference. Her involvement underscored the importance of small schools in the broader education landscape and helped strengthen the connection between state leadership and local districts.



The keynote address by Karen Cagle captured the heart of small-town leadership with humor, insight, and inspiration. Her message reflected the unique challenges and strengths of rural schools, resonating deeply with attendees and setting a positive tone for the event.

Sessions throughout the conference were well received, offering timely and relevant content for administrators, teachers, and board members alike. Attendees also enjoyed engaging with vendors who brought tools and resources tailored to small school environments.



We extend our heartfelt thanks to all who attended, presented, and supported this year's conference. OSSA remains committed to amplifying the voices and meeting the needs of small schools across Oregon, and we look forward to the continued collaboration ahead.

Thank You to Representative David Gomberg



The Oregon Small Schools Association extends its sincere appreciation to Representative David Gomberg for his participation in this year's OSSA Annual Conference. His thoughtful welcome to new attendees in his region, updates on legislative issues impacting education, and direct engagement with superintendents were highlights of the event.

Representative Gomberg's ongoing support for small and rural schools is deeply valued. His leadership and willingness to listen underscore the importance of strong partnerships between policymakers and the communities they serve. We are grateful for his continued advocacy on behalf of Oregon's small districts.

Winter Survey Summary



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Prepared by Assist Education Services LLC