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OROFINO SCHOOL DISTRICT OFFERS CASH TO HELP KIDS GET CREDITS TO GO-ON

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(BOISE) – The Orofino School District is so convinced that dual-credit classes will get more of its students attending college that it's been putting up its own money to help them advance into higher education.

Superintendent Bob Vian noted that he and the Orofino school board "felt that if a student could get ten college credits, there was a good chance they'd consider going to college. But if they could get 40, it was an absolute certainty." That's roughly a third of the way to a bachelor's degree (120 credits) or two-thirds of the way toward an associate's degree (60 credits) from most colleges.

"A couple of things stand in the way of kids going to college, especially in a poor rural community like ours," Vian said. "I see three obstacles. First, many of our parents have nothing beyond a high school diploma themselves. Second, it takes a whole lot of money.

"Third, kids often ask themselves if they're smart enough to go to college," he said.

"If we can get them in dual credit classes, it shows them they could be successful in college," because most students find they are capable of doing college-level work, Vian said. Dual credit classes, such as those offered through the state's Advanced Opportunities program, help students take classes that count toward both their high school and college degrees. The current Fast Forward part of Advanced Opportunities pays for three credit hours for juniors and six credits for seniors. Other dual credit courses beyond that tend to be out of pocket expenses for a student's family.

But in Orofino, they wanted to go beyond the state subsidy. To help push students to earn as many college credits as possible before graduation from high school, the school board set aside \$15,000 in its budget to be made available to help students take additional dual credit classes, and it also offered to pay for up to six credits for sophomores. The goal was to help kids go on after high school to either a vocational-technical program or a college.

"We're doing what we can to remove obstacles for kids," Vian said. But the district's funds could have a huge payoff in a successful future for the district's students.

The district has 360 students potentially eligible for the district's financial aid, and this year 43 students applied for the district subsidy, which goes beyond the state subsidy. Combined, the district and state programs will help Orofino students earn about 170 college credits this year. Furthermore, Vian said, with the new Advanced Opportunities program that will go into effect July 1, "if they work hard at it, (in the future) it looks like they could get an associate's degree at no cost to their parents," Vian said.

The new version of the Advanced Opportunities Program that will be in effect next school year will provide each student with a "bank" of \$4,125 that they can use to pay for dual credit courses (as well as overload courses and some college credit-bearing and technical exams). Since high school students can typically take a college dual credit course for about \$65 a credit, that's



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potentially up to 63 credits per student. But, state officials admit, Advanced Opportunities is currently being underutilized by students. At present, statewide, each graduate only averages just under six dual credits earned.

Getting the word out is the problem, Vian admitted. He writes a column for the local weekly newspaper where he mentions dual credit programs and occasionally he gives talks about the program to local organizations. He also discusses it during an annual meeting with incoming freshmen and sophomore parents.

“There’re so many opportunities going missing when kids don’t take advantage” of the state and district programs for dual credit, he said. “My goal is for kids to leave the district close to their associate’s degree.”

He knows that college can be expensive, “but you can usually find a way to pay for it,” he said, while at the same time he recognizes the concerns students have about “piling up a lot of debt.” Still, he pointed out, already having an associate’s degree, or being close to it at the time a student graduates from high school, can typically trigger significant scholarship opportunities.

One of the bottlenecks to taking full advantage of dual credit programs, especially in smaller districts like Orofino, is that “we don’t have a lot of teachers certified for dual credit classes,” Vian admitted, and the district hadn’t taken full advantage in the past of the online courses available through the state’s Idaho Distance Learning Academy.

But, he said, the school board has agreed to add an IDLA supervising teacher at the high school for next year and counselors will emphasize the dual credit programs. At the same time, the district is adding an extra column to the career ladder to provide extra pay for those teachers that are certified to teach dual credit classes.

Vian said his desire to emphasize dual credit courses came following a conversation he had one day with some fellow superintendents. “In my family, the conversation was always, ‘what will you do after you graduate from high school?’ In theirs, it was ‘what will you do after you graduate from college.’ A lot of this has to do with mindsets and expectations,” he said. Too many families see a high school diploma as a measure of success, but it just isn’t enough anymore.

For Vian and the Orofino school district, a diploma is just the first step, and the district’s efforts to help students earn dual credits are them go on to an advanced education after high school.

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For more details about the state’s Advanced Opportunities Program, go to the State Department of Education Website at <http://www.sde.idaho.gov/student-engagement/advanced-ops/index.html>.