

# **EDITORIAL: A school thinking big**

**Scott Wilson | Posted: Wednesday, November 6, 2013 3:00 am**

The Port Townsend schools are taking the first steps toward a bold vision of an educational enterprise that could energize the minds and hands of our next generation of young people. It could also make our schools a magnet for new families, talent and even new business, rather than being, at best, a neutral force.

Dr. David Engle, the superintendent now in his second year at the helm of the school district, laid out this vision before a packed room of the Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce Monday. It is breathtaking in its ambition, but firmly rooted in the practical reality of the coastal geography, trades, history and applications that literally surround us. It's time for everybody to start paying attention.

First, Engle presented today's reality – budget-strapped schools, essentially on life support, struggling to keep up with federal and state mandates enforced, metaphorically, through spankings and shaming of district leadership and staff; declining enrollment; an older population with fewer school-age young people, per capita, than any county in Washington; a high percentage of poverty-level families; state budget support that resembles the drip system of a hospital bed, not an infusion of needed investment in education.

“We believe there is a correlation between student education and the health of the community,” he said. He seeks to improve both.

Engle proposes leaping ahead of the mandates by reorganizing school curriculum and school life around a meta-theme that infuses local life already – the coast, the marine world, the universe of boats and navigation, the maritime sciences and culture. He calls it Maritime Discovery Schools.

“Powerful learning is relevant and applicable,” he said, as a basic tenet of his place-based approach to learning. “Hands-on craftsmanship is honored as intellect.”

In broad terms, it means working over the next few years to adapt the schools' goals and curriculum to a marine-related context. This does not mean that the only thing our students will learn is swimming, navigation and eelgrass. Instead, it means that physical education would include swimming, water safety and rescue at sea; that math would include the mathematical problems of navigation and hull design; that biology would include the study of eelgrass beds as nurseries and the issues of ocean acidification.

At all levels – kindergarten through graduation – it means finding local, hands-on, age-appropriate applications of what is being taught intellectually. Consider these examples: Elementary school kids may be doing beach walks, learning about tidal cycles and finding critters under rocks. Young middle-

school kids may learn about the ideal forest conditions along Chimacum Creek for salmon spawning. Older middle-schoolers may be out navigating on longboats and reading Moby Dick. High-schoolers may practice GIS mapping, film a documentary about boat-building and build an underwater robot.

These students will also be learning a thousand other things. But a considerable portion of their education will be grounded in what surrounds us.

A specialized part of this program is a focused Maritime Academy for juniors and seniors, said Engle, a school within the school. Students who sign up for this option will indeed be focusing on the trade skills that might one day get them employed on a vessel or in a boat shop or in computer-aided sailboat design.

It's a long-term vision, and no part of it will come easily or quickly. But Engle made it clear that he's committed for the long term. He's already out looking for extra funding from corporate and nonprofit sources, and extra funding is needed to make the shift – he estimated he needs \$125 per student per year for five years. After the shift is made, then he expects a Port Townsend education to cost no more than it does today.

Soon, a website will be launched with program details. In the meantime, Engle noted that he or another organizer will come speak to any group any time to discuss this exciting vision for our schools and our community. Call him and find out more.

(Full disclosure: My wife is on the Port Townsend School Board, but I'd be really excited about this anyway.)