

NW RISE SPOTLIGHT

# CUSICK SCHOOL DISTRICT (WASHINGTON)



Cusick School District serves a rich and diverse group of communities in the Northeast corner of Washington state, including students from the nearby Kalispel Indian Reservation and the towns of Cusick and Usk. The district has a long history of building relationships to meet the needs of its students. For example, Cusick is especially proud of its close collaboration with the Kalispel Tribe to develop a half-day Salish immersion program, now in its third year, as well as the CAMAS afterschool programs.

This enthusiasm for collaboration is just one strength Cusick brought to NW RISE. Like other districts, Cusick initially administered the student engagement survey to students in classrooms involved in NW RISE collaborative projects. Participating teachers met regularly to analyze results and deepen their understanding of classroom successes and challenges related to instruction. In 2017, when NW RISE schools started using the survey districtwide, one challenge stood out immediately: chronic absenteeism.

**“With only 150 days in our school year, having 35 percent of students missing 18 or more classes a year was very troubling,” says special services director and NW RISE team member Cynthia Johnston.**

The NW RISE engagement survey highlighted a gap the district felt it had yet to address successfully. “We already had access to discipline, student achievement, and attendance data,” says Johnston, “but we knew we needed to do something to build engagement and address the social-emotional learning needs of our students.”

Along with other NW RISE schools, Cusick reflected on how the district might overcome this challenge. Teachers recognized that the stress of working to increase student achievement had reduced the number of fun and engaging activities for students. The teachers decided this was an opportunity, and they got to work developing a series of authentic cross-content activities to improve the school climate and build student engagement. They reached out to community members and started working creatively.

One popular new tradition is the middle school outdoor field trip, now in its third year. This fall, science, math, English, and art teachers collaborated with the U.S. Forest Service and the Kalispell Tribe to engage students in academic, cultural, and recreational learning activities at Indian Creek. Students engaged in tree-climbing, archery, and lessons on how to recognize tree and fish

varieties. Selected high school students were there to help the trip go smoothly, and the field trip culminated in a final project in which students created a journal, designing their own covers and reflecting on the day and what they learned.

Another new engagement activity is Cusick's biannual "writing day." Middle and high school students spend the school day researching, discussing, and writing about a real-world topic such as the oil pipeline protests in North Dakota, in which some Cusick families participated. The writing day is one of the few times students can spend such a sustained amount of time on a single project that is focused on strengthening a specific skill, explains Johnston. "It also turns out to be one of the best things we've done to increase English language arts test scores. Not only is it fun, but it gives students focused practice with the format of the state's writing test."

Another new activity is the community interview project. Middle and high school students develop and ask powerful questions of respected community senior citizens and/or elders focused on a specific theme, such as changes in Pend Oreille County over the last 75 years. Organized by Cusick's history and English teachers, the project is a massive undertaking. Students must practice their interview techniques, then tape, transcribe, and write up the results. As a thank you, they give back the final project to their interviewees and celebrate their new learning.

Not all engagement activities are academic. At the end of this semester, students will participate in a half-day fair of teacher-led activities, from line dancing to making apple sauce, that are designed to reinforce their sense of belonging at the school.

The focus on student engagement is already having an impact—a recent student survey showed rising levels of engagement, and staff and community members speak of a renewed energy that has spread across the district. A community that has long understood the power of collaboration and relationships is learning new ways to bring that directly into its schools.