

### **Making Community Connections Early**

April 2004 -- Windward High Tech High in Ferndale just opened its doors at the beginning of February to 72 ninth and tenth graders. But the teachers and staff are already working hard to build sustainable connections with family and community.

At the end of February, Windward parents were invited to a Parent Open House, where they participated in student-led tours (the school is a converted bingo hall/car dealership) talked with teachers, and met other parents.

“This is the students’ open house,” said Principal Jill Iwasaki, as over a hundred students and parents milled about. “We wanted students to have an opportunity to show off their new school and to tell their parents what happens here.”

The student comments included:

- *“I’ve heard there will be more kid-directed projects.”*
- *“In a big school, I wouldn’t have a chance to get involved in things like students government. I’m going to run here.”*
- *“The classes aren’t necessarily smaller, but they feel smaller because you know everyone.”*
- *“There is more one-on-one with teachers here. They will come over and help you figure stuff out.”*

Parent Michelle Sorenson, whose son Mathew is a sophomore, is pleased with what she’s seen at the school. “I know he won’t get lost here. By the time he’s a senior, the school will only be the size of a class in a regular high school.”

“Windward parents want to be involved in a way they haven’t been in the past,” says Allison Bennett, Windward’s Community Coordinator. “They aren’t interested in selling cookie dough.”

She points to the more than 60 parents who recently attended the first Windward Parent Community meeting (also known as the Parent Teacher Organization at other schools). “I hope the parents will connect with one another and support each other in this newness,” she adds.

“Kids and parents are excited about the different learning opportunities that will take place at Windward. Our students are proactive and are interested in doing more than just taking tests,” said Brian Jensen, an Americorps volunteer who coordinates the school’s senior project.

To encourage students to create connections with their community, teams of two or more Windward students can apply for mini-grants to develop a service learning project that

will benefit the Ferndale community. For example, students might develop a plan to create a community garden. The grant resources would be used to pay for plants, seeds, tools, and gardening classes.

“The goal of the mini-grants is to match the needs of the community with student interests,” says Allison.

To apply for a grant, students must complete an application, which asks them to describe the purpose of their project and how it will impact the community. They must also list the community partners and describe how they will be involved in the project. Lastly, the students are asked to discuss their plans for measuring the project’s outcomes and informing the public about their project.

The Windward Advisory Group, comprised of parents, community members, teachers, and students, oversees the mini-grant program and will choose which projects to fund. A subcommittee developed a rubric with criteria that includes the project’s significance and impact on the community, the depth of the learning opportunity, the project’s connection to school work, and the level of community interest and support.

Science teacher Jenny Buron, who is a member of the Advisory Group, is piloting the mini-grants this spring in her classes. “In order to get the grant process up and running, we really needed some brave souls (teachers and students) to tackle it for us so that we can streamline our process for submitting, reviewing, and awarding the grants. I wanted my science classes to be more project oriented with a long-term focus, so when the Advisory Group asked for help and my students came forward with some project ideas, we decided to roll with it,” she says.

“This whole process is far more involved than a typical teacher-directed school project, so it has taken some unlearning on the part of the students and us teachers,” Jenny adds. “A lot of what has happened so far has been done with only a little of the needed community mentorship. We want to encourage the students to contact several community mentors before even writing the grants.”

Another way Windward students connect with community members is by participating in the Power Lunch Program. On Wednesdays, a community member volunteers to spend an hour having lunch with a group of interested students.

“The Power Lunches provide a casual opportunity for students and adults to connect in a meaningful way,” says Allison. “Students have the opportunity to learn about the guest’s professional life, education, and interests. Guests will learn about the students’ interests, thoughts, and academic lives.”

Ferndale School board member Mary Jo Durborow was a guest at one of the lunches. “The Power Lunch was a blast. I thought I might be too boring as a guest, but the students were interested in policy and how it affects them. What struck me most were how diverse a group they were and how engaged they all were in the conversation.”