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It's the Principal of the Thing: Guiding a Rural School has its Own Trials

Susan Wilson

Tim France

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An interview with Tim France, principal of Willamina High School

Tim France, principal of Willamina High School, home of the Bulldogs.

The difficulties of K-12 education have become familiar to citizens of the metroscape, but they are usually viewed through the lens of urban and suburban schools, with their problems of multi-ethnic populations, crowded classrooms, strained budgets, and the like. Metroscape® was curious about the struggles and triumphs of the schools in the rural areas of the region, so we sent our interviewer, Susan Wilson, a Portland freelance writer, to Willamina to talk to a small town education leader in hopes of glimpsing the realities of schooling kids in that often overlooked setting.

A small-town principal is a versatile member of a close-knit community. When Tim France rolls up his sleeves to get to work, he might be chairing a committee meeting to discuss fundraising efforts, or he might be in a huddle on the football field coaching his team through a winning season. He leads an entirely different kind of team in his full-time job as principal at Willamina High School, a job requires that energetic leadership and a game plan all its own. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

—the Editor

Susan Wilson: *You served as a teacher and coach in Powers* [southern Oregon[*and in Nyssa* [eastern Oregon] *prior to assuming the role of principal at Willamina High School. Did you grow up in a small town, and what attracted you to these unique rural communities as an educator and a coach?*

Tim France: I grew up in Alsea which is a very small rural town. I ended up going to Linn-Benton Community College for two years before transferring to Linfield (College). I've really always liked a small rural town and that's where I feel the most comfortable. We went over to the east side at Nyssa for three years but it was just a little too far from home for our family so we decided to come back. This is one of the communities that had an opening and we felt it would be a good fit. I wrestled here when I was growing up, plus I know the area from my days at Linfield.

SW: *Willamina straddles the southern-most boundary of Yamhill County and the northern-most boundary of Polk County. Tell us, briefly, a little about the community as you know it.*

TF: The county lines do run right through Willamina. Our two main communities are Willamina and Grand Ronde. Grand Ronde continues to grow close to the tribe [Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde] and to the casino area. The tribal housing continues to expand. We've been seeing growth every year out there since I've been here.

SW: *It's commonly known that eastern Oregon has a large share of rural schools. Willamina and other schools in western counties such as Yamhill, are rural in their own right. Given the size of schools in Portland, Salem and the medium-sized communities found further south along the I-5 corridor, do the rural schools of Western Oregon get lost in the mix? Do they have an identity crisis?*

TF: I wouldn't think so, no. We're definitely not the Metro, definitely not large schools, but as small schools we have our own community. There's a lot of identity within those communities. With small schools there are a lot of things we can offer. One of those is athletics and that's one of the things that really surrounds the community.

SW: *How often do you have a chance to meet with principals from other parts of the region and throughout the state?*

TF: For the region we have basically two things we go to. Willamette ESD [Education Service District] pulls in all of the principals once a month in Salem. Then, all of the Yamhill County principals meet at Chemeketa Community College in McMinnville. In that way, we have a fairly local group. We meet and work on local issues in our local area.

SW: *Do you have a chance to serve on working committees where you can truly tackle the problems facing your schools?*

TF: Yes, definitely.

SW: *Is the headcount for your school pretty typical compared to others in the region?*

TF: Just under 300. Other than McMinnville in the general area, Willamina, Sheridan, Amity and Dayton are comparable in size. Yamhill-Carlton is a little bigger, Gaston smaller, and Mac [McMinnville] very large.

SW: *What is the biggest challenge facing the rural K-12 schools in Oregon?*

TF: One of the first ones, it's kind of obvious in its own right because it's every where in the state, is funding. I feel we are very fortunate with the staff that we have. We took 12 cut [non-paid] days. As a district we decided that would be a lot better than cutting a whole lot of personnel.

SW: *Does that apply to everybody?*

TF: Everybody. Secretaries, administrators, teachers, custodians, bus drivers—basically, everybody in the district ended up taking 12 cut days. But that really allowed us to maintain staff. We still were meeting our educational minutes so it was an option that we had because of how long our kids go to school each day. It turned out to be the best outcome given the situation.

SW: *Aside from funding what are the additional challenges for rural K-12 schools?*

TF: Just trying to have all the programs. We don't have the same resources that other schools have, but we are working together and that makes it easier.

SW: *In November 2006, the Willamina School District asked the voters to approve a $9.25 million general obligation bond that would fund renovations and new school buildings. What was the outcome of that bond levy?*

TF: I'm trying to remember how many bonds we've actually put up, but they've all been turned down. Willamina has not passed a bond … since I believe, 1980. We did go out for a couple of bonds, the most recent was last May, and it was turned down. The one before that was turned down [both lost by a small margin]. We are very close to getting a bond passed. I think part of it is getting a great long-term plan for the district and going from there. That's what we've been working on lately, is getting a long-range plan so we know exactly what we want to do. Every bond we've put out there has been a little different. We've said we need to get a long-range plan in place and decide what we want to do and hopefully go from there. [Editor's Note: *According to the Yamhill County official election results, the November 2006 bond was defeated by 166 votes; the May 2009 bond went down by 58 votes.*]

SW: *To what extent does your school rely on government funding, such as Title II grants, or private grants to operate?*

TF: The district does get some title funds. There's Title II and Title VII, lots of different title programs. I'd say our elementary school gets a lot more of Title II, and then VII is for Native (students of Native American descent). Our district is about 33% Native and so we benefit from those funding programs, but it's not like ELL-type funding [English Language Learner], where you get additional weighted ADM [average daily membership]. Basically, it's just a supplement. From the state you get so much per enrolled student per day for the year. There's a formula there, how many years of experience your teachers have, how rural you are, a lot of different things that go into that formula.

One thing our district lacks the most is a grant writer because there are a lot of grants out there and that's something we need to take advantage of. Probably the last really sizable grant we got was an $80,000 grant from the Tribe and that went toward technology. That's one of the things we are doing again at this point, writing another grant for $80,000.

SW: *Was the grant spread over five years or awarded in a lump sum?*

TF: No, it was given all in one year. We basically updated our computer labs, got a mobile lab, document cameras and projectors. In the high school here every classroom has a video projector with document cameras.

SW: *What is the mobile lab?*

TF: We added 30 laptop computers to the library to make a [portable] lab.

SW: *Did the recession affect student headcount in any way or did local families tend to stick around and weather the storm?*

TF: We have lost students due to parents not having jobs and having left to go find jobs. Has it hurt our community as far as the number of students? Yes, it has. We're down a little bit from the previous year. Some of it's due to graduation and having a large class leave and a small [freshman] class coming in. There's some of that, but there are additional kids who left because their parents had to find work.

SW: *You said last year's graduating class was a bit higher than usual and the incoming class a bit smaller. How many students graduated?*

TF: We had 69 who graduated. It was a bigger bubble because there were a few who didn't graduate. I think we started with 75. The incoming class this year was about 60.

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SW: *The No Child Left Behind* [NCLB] *Act requires that school districts be accountable for overall student performance. The Oregon Department of Education publishes an annual report card for each school district that assesses whether the students and the schools have met annual targets for academic performance. How did this initiative change the way you do business in a smaller school district?*

TF: Well, of course, you have to look at it...it's something you have to take advantage of and we feel very fortunate that last year we actually met AYP [adequate yearly progress] in all K-12 areas. We feel a lot of pride in this. We met everything. Not only the high school did, but the middle school did and our elementary. Actually, the elementary school has met it every year, but our middle school and high school have had difficulties. We were right on the line for the previous four years. When I first got here we were down and one area we could not pass was 'economically disadvantaged math.' It's one sub-group that did not meet the standard. And, of course, when you have one subgroup that doesn't meet, overall you don't meet.

SW: *Is yours a K-8 and 9-12 school system?*

France: No, that's one of the things we're talking about in the long-range plan. We have K-5 at that end (referring to the opposite side of the complex) and 9-12 at this end of the building. Our middle school, grades 6, 7 and 8 are actually at Grand Ronde. The middle school was built out there in the 1970s or 80s and it was actually a K-8 building. Then, sometime in the late 1990s, a time when the economy wasn't doing too well, we ended up closing one of the buildings. The building closed was the oldest, which was then the high school. Prior to that, it was K-5 and 6-8 housed here, Grande Ronde also had K-5 and the one high school was 9-12. So we had four buildings that we were operating. I think it was in 2000 or 2001, maybe, we reconfigured and went down to three.

SW: *Do rural schools have a hard time recruiting highly qualified teachers as deemed essential by the NCLB initiative? If so, what strategies are employed to attract such teachers to these districts?*

TF: I'd say yes, in that it is hard to find the teacher that fits the right combination of what you need. When a teacher leaves they might have taught English and drama. Drama isn't something you have to have a license for, but then the district's trying to find a great English teacher who can also teach drama. That's where it gets a little difficult, because at a large school you might have a teacher just for drama. We don't have just a drama teacher. And so, it's a matter of finding a teacher to fit the hole.

SW: *Do you think your school and others like it are at a disadvantage in trying to achieve NCLB teacher recruitment targets?*

TF: There are some things that are harder for small schools. We ask most of our teachers to teach more than one subject. I think that is the piece that is harder for us. It's not too often that we have a teacher who teaches one subject all day long. Most of them teach one or two subjects because of the need of a small school. If you go to Powers or Alsea, both 1-A schools, they might be teaching three or four subjects each.

SW: *What about student performance targets? Are rural schools at an advantage or disadvantage when it comes to meeting the rigorous academic standards of the NCLB Act?*

TF: No. If anything, being a small school has

an advantage over the large schools in meeting NCLB. The larger the school you go to, the more subgroups you have which gives you more ways to fail. We don't have all ethnic sub-groups. We basically have White and Native American. At some schools you will have all these other sub-groups who have to meet all the standards. We are fortunate a little bit in that regard. The smaller your sample, the larger your margin of error. Of course, the larger the school you go to, the smaller the margin of error. So, I guess if anything that's in a small school's favor.

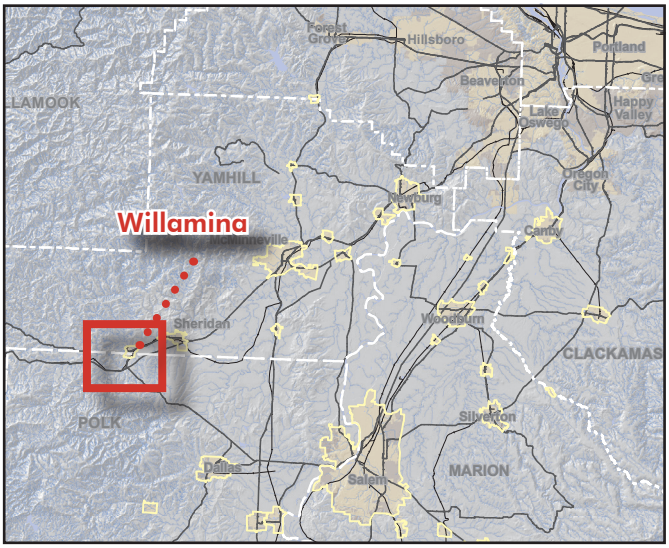
SW: *Tell us about some of the creative teaching processes or other innovations that smaller schools have employed to improve student performance.*

TF: One thing we have been doing that other districts do not is working together. We've put together a Certified Nursing Assistant [CNA] program through Chemeketa Community College. As schools here, we're too small to offer CNA ourselves, but when we combine we end up getting a couple of students from here and there. All of us work together to accommodate the schedules to get enough students together. The students take the classes in McMinnville. And, for the past two years, we have had an apprenticeship program. It's electrical and millwright training.

SW: *What do the students walk away with in terms of credentials?*

TF: They are doing the first year of the adult electrical apprenticeship program and the first year of the adult millwright. It takes them two years to get one adult year done. They have 1000 hours by the time they get out of high school, so they are well on their way. We're recruiting them as sophomores. The year right after high school they will complete the other half of the program and have their journeyman license and be in a $60,000-a-year job. Both of these programs want above-average students, those who are doing well academically. I think some of the things that have helped is that kids see the importance of grades a little bit sooner, instead of adopting the mentality, "I want to go to college, when do I have to get my grades up?' For these programs, they are getting involved as juniors, and so they need to have their grades up freshman and sophomore year.

SW: *How do your students stack up in terms of academic performance, compared to other schools of similar size in Oregon?*



TF: The state sends out a report where they compare us to same-size districts and same-size population and we've been doing well the whole time. And this last year was, of course, a higher mark for us as we ended up meeting in all areas. The percentage of high schools that meet all AYP's is smaller. We were one of the schools out of, I think, 69 that passed.

SW: *Is it 2012 that you're supposed to be meeting all NCLB standards?*

TF: Well, we are supposed to be meeting the standards every year, but I think it's 2014 where we are supposed to be at 100% [achievement]. We want every kid to be successful, we want everybody to achieve this. The practicality of it? I think it may be a little far-reaching to say that every single student will do it. You have health issues. You have so many variables that aren't allowed as exceptions. Sometimes education isn't the top priority for a kid. It's "Where am I sleeping tonight, or where am I going to get food tonight?"

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SW: *What is the drop-out rate for rural schools as compared to their urban counterparts?*

TF: Quite a bit less. I think our drop-out rate was about 3% last year out of about 300 students. For us, that's high. Many years it's down to 1 or 2%. At a small school it fluctuates a lot more, because the smaller you are the more the percents change. One year I think there was a 9% drop out rate, that was a spike, and then the next year it was down to 1%. The new thing is they are going away from the drop-out rate to a four-year completion system. They're calling it the Cohort Graduation Rate. As kids enter as freshmen, they will have four years to graduate. The completion rate needs to be at 90%.

They can start at another school and transfer here, but starting their freshman year they have four years to graduate. And so, there's some little flaws to the system. We want all students to graduate in four years. That's the goal. We encourage non-graduating students to come back for a fifth year, and the new system wouldn't count those students as completers. The reason our drop-out rate is low is because we do retain some kids in that fifth year. They feel it is worthwhile to come back to get that diploma. With the new standards, there isn't that incentive. To meet the standard, they would have to finish in four years. And we're talking about a regular high school diploma, not a GED, not an adult education diploma, not a modified diploma. We have some students who are in special education who graduate with a modified diploma. They wouldn't meet the new cohort graduation rate.

SW: *Teen pregnancy has been in the news a lot lately. How does Willamina High School's pregnancy statistics stack up compared to other rural schools through Yamhill and Polk Counties?*

TF: Well, last year we were high. We were in the news; there was media coverage on it. When you're a small school you're going to have those abnormal years. Lucky for us, it was just an abnormal year. This year we are at zero. I would say that's unusual, and if we get through the whole year with no pregnancies, that will be an abnormal year also. Each year we typically see two. We count parents as well as pregnancies. So, if the baby's father is in our school as well, we count that. Last year, I think we had 12 students identified as teen parents, and this year we are at zero.

SW: *Did you do any education programs? I know you have a health center on campus.*

TF: Yes, we have a health center. Part of what happened last year, is we have allowed them to offer contraception. That's one of the things that hit the media: should schools do this? As a school-based center, the district gets to say whether the [independent] clinic can do planned parenthood on school property. The school district decided "yes" and allowed that the decision would be left up to the medical professional in the clinic. If the student opts to use birth control the parents will be notified. If they go to an off-campus health center, then the parents don't have to be notified.

SW: *Did the parents support it?*

TF: We had some discussions as to whether it should be allowed. A lot of people who were opposed to it weren't necessarily parents of the kids. Surveys we did in the district were in favor of making it available. If they want to use it they will, and if the kids use it their parents will know about it.

SW: *Do you know what percentage of last year's graduating seniors planned to attend (trade school, community college or four-year university)?*

TF: It's been running about 30%. We have to keep track of it. We have some that go into trade programs, but most go to community college. I'm a product of one, and, especially from a small school, it's not bad to go to a community college and get your first year or two. There's some financial gain from this choice as community colleges are a lot less expensive.

SW: *How does this compare with other schools in the district and with larger schools?*

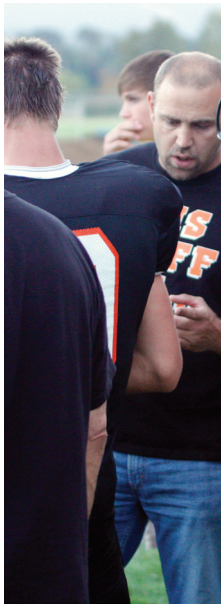
TF: The question is, how many kids will get into college and stay in it? At larger schools there may be a higher percentage of students who go on to college, but how many of them stay in for a term or two then drop out? That's one of things we try to push. Have a plan of what you want to do after high school mapped out.

SW: *If the local kids do not go to college at the traditional age, do you have a feel for what type of jobs they are getting after they leave high school?*

TF: We have a major employer in our area with the tribe and its casino. A lot of our students work there during school and actually end up with full-time jobs by the time they graduate. For some kids, that's been a pretty good source of employment. Some of the jobs out there lead to decent wage. Some of the students have gone into the timber industry and are making a go of that.

SW: *Does the local veneer plant, when it's up and operating, employ mostly adults or do the high school students get jobs there?*

TF: Not many of the high school kids go right



Tim France coaching School Bulldogs.

the Willamina High

into that. We're doing the millwright program and that's through Hampton Lumber Mills.We didn't have any students in it last year, but Hampton has provided two apprenticeship slots for millwrights here in Willamina. We're hoping this year that we'll get at least one or two of our sophomores to fill out the applications, do well in the interviews, and get positions. Last year Hampton offered a total of five apprenticeship spots to kids from Willamina, Sheridan, Amity, Dayton, Yamhill-Carlton and McMinnville. It gets to be selective because they want kids who are doing well, but it's a good opportunity for those who make it.

SW: *How many join the military?*

TF: Every year we have between one and three. One year we had about five, so that was a bigger group. We have invited recruiters into our district. They come to the school and make a presence two or three times a year.

SW: *Today's rural schools have evolved considerably since the era of the one-room school house. In your dealings with officials across the state, including other educators, what are the myths or prevailing misconceptions about rural schools that exist today?*

TF: Probably, one of the misconceptions is that we don't teach them anything. That we are just too small. But I do think that we offer a quality education and lots of opportunities to the kids. I think, if anything, we have more opportunities for them. More of our kids get involved in extracurricular activities than the larger, more urban schools.

SW: *What kind of extracurricular activities?*

TF: FFA [Future Farmers of America] is a big one, athletics, drama, choir, band. We have Club Med, a program for students looking to get into health careers, SMILE [Science and Math Investigative Learning Experiences]. It's an after-school program that OSU [Oregon State University] promotes starting in the fourth grade to student populations that historically might not go on to college. Students who complete the program get some tuition for OSU.

SW: *What changes would you like to see in your district in the next five years?*

TF: Part of what we're trying to do is the long-range plan. Of course, it hasn't been finalized yet so I can't tell you what that plan would be. But definitely moving the district forward would be great. One of the things I see, and it would cost money but well worth the investment, is a grant writer. I think that would be something our district would be looking forward to having—a great grant writer.

SW: *Is there anything you would like to add that would give us a glimpse into the life of a small-town high school principal?*

TF: I should speak to the different roles that a rural school principal plays. We have the same requirements of background and education, we're still in charge of the reports that go to the state, and the budgeting, but there are a few more hats. One of the hats I'm wearing is the fund raising. I just got done coaching football. At larger schools you don't even remotely consider having a principal coach.

SW: *How common is that to have a principal who also coaches, and were you recruited with coaching in mind, or did that come about later?*

TF: The smaller the school, the more common it would be. At 4-A schools, and higher, it's unusual. You get down to some of the 1A schools and your superintendent might be a coach. When I took the job as principal, I was not going to coach. An opening came up for assistant coach and I was going to help out. Then, right before the season started, our head coach got sick and was out all summer. When it came down to the start of the season he couldn't do it, so that's how I got started coaching here.

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SW: *What are some of the other hats that school principals wear in a smaller school?*

TF: We get involved in the youth programs and we help out in the other factions, such as working around the school property. We have some days when we go out and do things in the community. We had a pond cleanup down here and we've had students and community members come in on a Saturday to help out. M