

# Bridging the achievement gap

## Central Kitsap High School earns state award.

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Staff writer

It didn't happen overnight. It was a long time in the making.

Central Kitsap High School was recognized last week with receiving a 2010 Washington Achievement Award for Closing Achievement Gaps — one of 24 schools in the state and only one of two high schools.

Although the award is based on two prior years of state student testing, officials said bringing the grades of minority students into parity with those of white and Asian students has taken a concerted effort.

"It's not any one or two years of work," said Central Kitsap High School Principal Stephen Coons. "It's a combination of factors."

And students contacted following the award announcement said they appreciate the effort.

"I feel they have a strong commitment to the students," said junior Calvin Brown, who is black, adding that he believes his teachers want all students to reach their full potentials.

One kick-start was initiated four years ago by Central Kitsap teachers, JD Sweet and Elizabeth Blandin, said many teachers and Coons. The married couple took it upon themselves to provide diversity training for the Central Kitsap faculty and staff. Though the Central Kitsap School District provided training in the spring of 2007, Sweet said there was a lack of preparation for it and nothing to follow it.

"We studied a lot and put

together a solid plan for our staff," Sweet said. "And they stepped up to the plate — big time."

Central Kitsap science teacher Paul Birkenfeld received insight from both the district's training and that of Sweet and Blandin.

"We all have a front pack of life experiences that result us in seeing our students a certain way," said Birkenfeld, adding that the concept of first identifying one's "front pack," or biases made from one's personal experiences, was introduced in the district's training. Once an individual comprehends his own biases, he can understand and try to help others, he added.

Birkenfeld teaches Advanced Placement chemistry and Advanced Placement physics and is in his 15th year at the school. A growing percentage of students are stepping up and challenging themselves by taking Advanced Placement classes that are optional, Birkenfeld said, adding that he now sees a better representation of students taking his classes.

And there's a reason for the increase in Central Kitsap students wanting to challenge themselves academically.

As school guidance counselor Randy Templeton sees it, teachers have always had the determination to help students. However, he admitted that 15 years ago they went about it the wrong way. Staff thought they were helping some students by having them take easier classes.

"We've reshaped our attitude in what helping means," Templeton said. "We're challenging them to help them."

Teachers and staff are also better identifying with stu-

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## ACHIEVEMENT

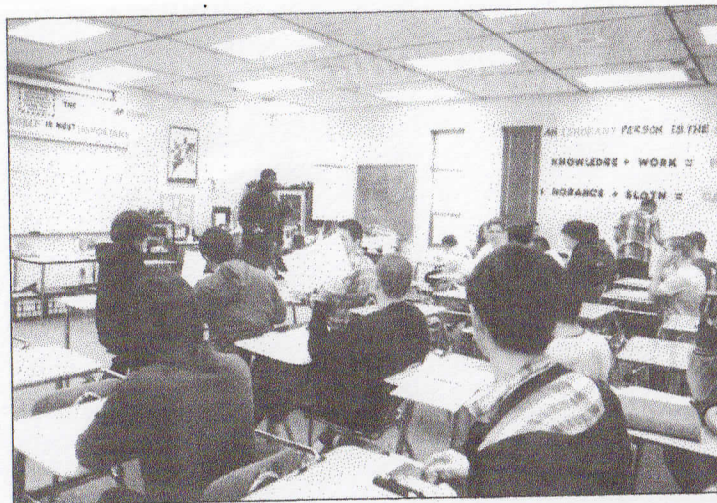
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dents and have learned to develop bonds of trust and respect with them.

"It's by how they get around to you — inside the classroom and outside the classroom," said sophomore Desiree Miglio, who is white, adding that she feels like teachers care about each individual student.

In some classrooms, the changes are distinct. Two years ago, Jenna Reynolds started a forum in her Spanish class where she invites Hispanic community members to discuss their experiences growing up as an immigrant or about their culture. She modeled this forum after one that Sweet and Blandin set up with members from the community with a variety of backgrounds discussing education with the teachers.

"I'm trying to break those stereotypes," Reynolds said, adding that at the beginning of the school year when she asks her students what comes to mind when they think of Spanish-speakers, a common response is, "someone in



Kristin Okinaka/staff photo

*History teacher at Central Kitsap High School, JD Sweet, explains a project to his U.S. History class Tuesday. The school received a 2010 Washington Achievement Award for Closing Achievement Gaps — one of two high schools in the state to earn the award.*

jeans and a white T-shirt trying to get a job outside of Home Depot."

The Washington Achievement Award is given in seven categories, ranging from overall excellence to specific subjects including math and language arts. This is the first time schools are being recognized for their efforts in closing the achievement gap among white and

Asian students compared to black, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native and Pacific Islander students. Performance is based on reading, writing, math and science on state standardized tests and each school is ranked on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "struggling" and 7 being "exemplary." The other high school that received the award for closing

achievement gaps is Walla Walla High School. The award is determined by the state Board of Education and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Though Asian students may be regarded as minorities in other contexts, in 12 years of state standardized testing data, they have not been the minority group, said Aaron Wyatt, spokesman for the state Board of Education.

"The highest performing group is the Asian group and the second highest performing is white students," Wyatt said. "In order to give schools a measurement, it made sense to put the top performing groups together and the others as a subgroup." Students' ethnicity is based on what group they identify with and indicate on their tests, he added.

Through the training that Sweet and Blandin provided, they created their consulting firm, New Phase New Ways, that continues to help other schools and organizations with culturally responsive teaching techniques. Blandin said the students were the reason the couple kept pushing for change, especially after learning about the

discrimination some faced.

"Hearing them express their frustration and some of the painful things they dealt with — that was motivating," she said.

In February 2009, Sweet and Blandin stopped their training with Central Kitsap but it continues through the district. In January 2008, the district hired Leah Kyaio to work with representatives, the diversity team leaders, from each school. Superintendent Greg Lynch said the focus throughout the district this summer will be on culturally responsive teaching — training to better understand cultures to be able to learn how to motivate all students. The results at Central Kitsap will also be implemented at other schools throughout the district, he said. District officials and teachers have noted that there is still work to be done in closing the achievement gap even more.

Sweet credits the Central Kitsap faculty and staff for having the "tough conversations" with one another and embracing the change.

"There's no handout," he said. "You just have to do it."