

Salish Coast Elementary officially dedicated

District officials, community partners credited



From left, Port Townsend School District Safety Coordinator Justin Gray presents a bronze plaque to honor the Salish Coast Elementary dedication Jan. 19, while Superintendent John Polm addresses attendees of the ceremony.

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The official dedication of Salish Coast Elementary on Jan. 19 afforded an opportunity to reflect on the history that led to the moment even as the assembled dignitaries looked to the future of the school.

Elaine Grinnell, Jamestown S’Klallam Tribal liaison to the Port Townsend School District, opened with a blessing, praying the school would be able to assist children and parents alike on their journeys, “because soon we will all be ancestors, and we want to be able to look down and see that a good job was done.”

Grinnell described the elementary school as providing the foundation for its students’ successes to come as adults.

Grinnell also acknowledged the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe’s suggestion that the school be named for its former chief — Chetzemoka. Although the name was not selected, she felt thankful nonetheless.

“Because Chetzemoka is here, and he’s also watching,” Grinnell said. “We’re thankful to give him this day, and the next time you start an elementary school, maybe you can name that one after Chetzemoka,” she added, drawing laughter from the crowd.

Grinnell presented a dictionary of the Klallam language to Port Townsend Schools Superintendent John Polm. In turn, Polm presented Salish Coast Elementary T-shirts to Grinnell and her fellow tribal members.

Polm credited a number of past and present school district officials with making the \$40 million, 68,000-square-foot elementary school possible, including facilities director Brad Taylor, project manager Kirk Robinson and the Port Townsend Education Foundation.

Port Townsend Mayor Deborah Stinson recalled when she first ran for city council, she was asked how she planned to fix schools, which struck her as odd at first, considering she wasn’t running for the school board.

“I soon realized that none of us are on isolated tracks in this community,” Stinson said. “We support each other’s successes.”

Stinson came to see the development of the school district as “critical to the long-term resiliency of the community,” and she worked with the city manager and director of development services to help the district.

Jefferson County Commission Chair Kate Dean praised Port Townsend as “the little district that could” for forging a way forward even during an economic recession, and ultimately persuading voters to pass the largest bond ever in Jefferson County for Salish Coast Elementary.

Dean invited attendees to recall their own elementary school years, which she cited as the source of “our most vivid, indelible childhood memories,” and “the foundation of our lives.”

Dean noted how often teachers identify mental health issues in students and provide them with needed structure in their lives.

“We’re not just building a campus here, but a reflection of the world we want to live in,” Dean said.

Former Port Townsend Schools Superintendent David Engle was lauded by Polm, who pointed out how Engle led the vision for a new elementary school before Polm’s tenure.

Engle became superintendent after he retired from the East Coast to return to his native Pacific Northwest in order to spend more time with his grandchildren in Seattle. That’s when he fell in love with what he deemed “a scrappy seaport” prone to contentiousness.

At the time, the community’s identity “was not connected to education,” Engle said, and it had not been supportive of bonds to that point.

To turn that around, Engle described his priority as “developing a connection between the district and the community, to make them realize, ‘We are part of you.’”

Although he believes “beautiful things” happened at Grant Street Elementary, Engle said he was ashamed of the facility’s constraints and wanted an elementary school that afforded students the ability to “see the outside weather and feel a sense of openness.”

“We’re not done yet,” Engle said. “We won’t be done for another 50 years.”

Jennifer James-Wilson, vice chair of the Port Townsend School Board, also recalled construction bonds being defeated twice before voters approved the one for Salish Coast Elementary.

When she consulted with school board members from Vancouver, Washington, they told James-Wilson, “Be bold, and a mighty force will come to your aid.”

Sure enough, even as the Port Townsend School District faced declining enrollment nearly a decade ago, James-Wilson saw “the right people came forward, or were found, from all walks of life.”

James-Wilson grew emotional as she said the community as a whole was the mighty force she’d been told about.

“The investment you made was awe-inspiring,” James-Wilson said. “I humbly thank you for your dedication.”

After a ribbon-cutting ceremony, district safety coordinator Justin Gray presented a bronze plaque to honor the Salish Coast Elementary dedication.