



TrekNorth becomes three-time Reward School

By [Bethany Wesley](#) Today at 12:34am

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BEMIDJI – TrekNorth is one of 20 schools in the state that is a three-time Reward School, a designation awarded based on student performance.

On Tuesday, the public charter school hosted Brenda Cassellius, the Minnesota education

commissioner, as she spoke with students and staff about how TrekNorth cultivates its student success.

“Three years as a Reward School and obtaining those kind of (test) scores is fantastic, and having the diversity that you have in this school is outstanding and exceptional,” Cassellius said.

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TrekNorth was one of several stops on the commissioner's schedule Tuesday, as she first visited Red Lake High School and Jack and Jill Preschool in Bemidji.

Today, she will visit Cass Lake-Bena High School in the morning before traveling to Shooting Star Hotel and Casino, where she will give the keynote address at the 2013 Minnesota Indian Education Association Conference. Afterward, she will visit White Earth Tribal & Community College in Mahnomen.

But the focus of visiting and touring TrekNorth, she said, is part of an ongoing mission to visit all of the three-time Reward Schools in the state.

"It's easy to see how TrekNorth earns some of those awards because of the impact it has on its students and the education it provides us with," said senior Kaili Simpson, who along with junior Ben Rudnick gave Cassellius a school tour.

After the tour, she conversed with a dozen TrekNorth staff members. Cassellius said she is a big fan of expeditionary learning, having once served as a teacher's assistant in Upward Bound, an expeditionary school at the University of Minnesota.

TrekNorth teachers reported they feel the school excels because it expects a lot, both from its students and its staff.

Fifty to 60 percent of TrekNorth students qualify for free and reduced lunch and 41 percent are

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American Indian students, reported Dan McKeon, executive director of the school.

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Those can be staggering statistics for a school that not only requires its students to be accepted into a post-secondary institution and focuses heavily on advanced placement curriculum.

“We expect every student to have at least an honest shot at doing well in college,” said teacher Mike Munson. “That’s pretty threatening, if you think of a first-generation American teenager.”

He credited low student-teacher ratios – TrekNorth averages about 16 students per class – as a key component in the school’s success.

“That means that (a) student doesn’t have crack to slip through,” Munson said. “I think class size is essential when you’re dealing with a population that is traditionally underserved.”

Jennifer Roy, who teaches science, said small class sizes allow staff to develop trusting relationships with students.

“The relationships that we have with students ... it allows us to maybe ask more of them and to understand a little bit better how they learn,” she said.

Seniors are sad to graduate and often return to campus a week later to simply visit with the staff, Roy continued.

“This is their family and their home, their stability,

for a lot of these kids,” she said. “I think that they work harder for us too because of that respect, we respect them and they appreciate what we’re doing for them.”

Chance Adams, also a teacher, said the high expectations extend to staff members. Teachers are observed four times a year and often receive suggestions for ways to improve.

“We’ve worked really hard to create a culture here where everybody has something to work on and we all know that. There’s no shame in that,” said Kristen Gustafson an art teacher. “We all have our own things and we can talk about it with each other and maybe we do peer coaching.”

McKeon said the statistics dictate the school must have a strong staff in order to expect as much from its students as it does.

“Really good teachers aren’t born,” he said. “You might have some innate abilities as a teacher but if you’re going to be really effective with our student body, you have to take that and work on it and work on it and work on it and be willing to hear the things that aren’t going well in your classroom and celebrate the things that are going well in the classroom.”

A familiar face

Accompanying Cassellius on her school tours is Josh Collins, the director of communications for the Minnesota Department of Education.

Collins is a 1995 graduate of Bemidji High School. Everywhere they went on Tuesday, Collins ran into former teachers and people who knew him well, including Munson, who was Collins' high school AP psychology teacher, and Ev Arnold, the superintendent at Red Lake who formerly was the principal of BHS.

"In this one day, I've been through his entire yearbook," Cassellius quipped.

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