Champions in Education
The recession hit Eugene, Oregon—including its schools—hard. The school district had cut $22 million from its 2011-2012 budget, laid off 100 teachers, and axed most advanced placement (AP) courses in biology, chemistry, and physics.

Parents were worried, says Tom Lininger, a University of Oregon law professor who led a group of faculty, all with children in Eugene and nearby budget-strapped school districts, to come up with a solution. HHMI Investigator Chris Doe, with two sons in the system, was among them.

“The school year had been reduced to 165 days; the national average is 180. Some parents were talking about moving their kids to private schools,” Lininger adds. “We knew it was important to do something. We understood that, with limited resources, the school district had focused its interest on students who were at risk of dropping out.”

Lininger and other campus representatives met with the superintendents of three Eugene-area school districts to outline a proposal that would offer 9th-through 12th-grade students specially designed courses at the university (legal considerations limited the university group’s ability to teach in the schools). “We had no disrespect for local teachers,” he says. “We just wanted to fill in some of the gaps.”

The university made campus classrooms and labs available. Through a grant, the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics agreed to cover the $60-per-course enrollment fee for students from families that needed financial help. The first session offered courses in microeconomics and environmental science. Chemistry, political science, history, psychology, and statistics came next. Though not official AP courses, the content tracks AP requirements and students can take the AP exams.

Students, about 30 per course, meet on Sundays and on the school district’s furlough and teacher improvement days. “The kids were all very motivated,” says Doe, who taught environmental science. “They loved being pushed and challenged. They got both high school AP credit and college credit.”

“The chance to take courses at the university was a huge gift,” says Paige Kouba, who took Doe’s course. “We were able to explore subjects that were otherwise unavailable to us,” adds Kouba, now majoring in ecology at Harvard University. “It was downright frightening to see the education system constantly fighting budget cuts.”

Doe, who studies how stem cells make neurons, chose to teach the two-semester course in environmental science, a field he knew little about. He scoured the Web and textbooks, “cramming” for three months to prepare 30 hours of lectures, 20-plus hours of lab experiments, and field trips to a local landfill and sewage treatment plant. “Preparing for the course and teaching it helped me get a better appreciation for the [rigor] involved in environmental science,” he says.

It also changed his actions. “I became more personally aware of my own impact on the environment,” he says. He traded the family’s minivan for an electric vehicle, installed solar panels on his house, and took up composting.

Doe’s efforts earned him a “Champion in Education” award from the Eugene and Springfield chambers of commerce. “People thought Chris walked on water,” Lininger says.

“But teaching this course has made me realize that teaching high school can be really, really enjoyable,” Doe says. “I have fun teaching these excited high school kids. It’s changed my life.”—Jim Barlow