

Audit

Continued from Page 2B

Measure 98, passed last year, which is now referred to by the state as the High School Success Fund.

He said the state is advising districts to develop programs that specifically address students not succeeding now, including mobile students, students of color, students navigating poverty and English Language Learners.

Linda Myers, the director of Strategic Initiatives for Salem-Keizer Public Schools, said statistics dating back to 2014 indicate high school students who identify as black in Salem-Keizer are over three times more likely to drop-out compared to their white peers.

In response, the district leveraged Measure 98 funds to hire a community resource specialist to focus on black students in grades 9-12 identified as "high risk" for dropping out, Myers said.

This position focuses on supporting students with issues of absenteeism, credit recovery, study habits and behavior.

"Since September, we have already seen an improvement in regular attendance, homework completion and improved grades in many of these targeted students," she said.

Don't leave middle schoolers out

Auditors also found a gap in which schools and students are getting attention and additional support from the state.

Schools with mid-range graduation rates — 67 to 85 percent — receive limited improvement support from the department, according to the audit, even though most non-graduates attend these schools.

And students struggling in middle school are not being given the tools they need to make the transition to high school a successful one.

"The Legislature and ODE (have) not emphasized middle school performance or student transitions from middle school to high school, though students who struggle in middle school are already at risk of not graduating," auditors found.

The department has previously pro-

vided support at the school level. They plan to work more at the district level to address some of these needs and include these schools in statewide initiatives and plans, according to Gill's letter.

They also plan to recommend state initiatives and performance measures for preK-12 grades on high school graduation outcomes, focusing on the role of middle schools.

Track the data

The department collects various data related to graduation rates, including discipline incidents, attendance, class sizes, assessment scores and freshmen-on-track rates.

However, the department doesn't track student grades or specific credits attained, information auditors say could be used to help more students graduate.

"This lack of student-level course performance data limits ODE's ability to analyze barriers to graduation," according to the audit. "Class performance data would help (the department) analyze when students are most likely to fall off track, which courses have high failure rates and how students' success or failure in specific courses ties to graduation."

While some states have one student information system that tracks everything from attendance to behavior, Gill said Oregon districts each have their own system. The state only requires certain indicators to be reported.

In order to move to a single system that would include the recommended data, change has to happen at the legislative level.

Gill said the state will send guidance to schools between now and the potential legislative change, which could happen in the 2019 session.

Show why graduation matters

Auditors also found the department needs to better explain the importance of graduation to parents and the community.

"Earning a high school diploma is a key life milestone," auditors wrote. "This achievement ... expands livelihood and career opportunities, whether a graduate enters the workforce or continues with higher education."

In contrast, research used in the audit shows not graduating leads to higher un-

employment, lower incomes, poorer health and higher incarceration rates.

Students aren't the only ones who face the consequences.

"Society also faces financial impacts such as higher social service and incarceration costs, and lower tax revenues from non-graduates," according to the audit. "This cost is estimated at \$260,000 to \$292,500 for each student without a high school diploma."

"We need Oregon's Department of

Education to step up its game and assume its leadership role to make Oregon a leader in education," said Secretary of State Dennis Richardson. "Oregon students deserve a world-class education and it's ODE's job to show how to get there."

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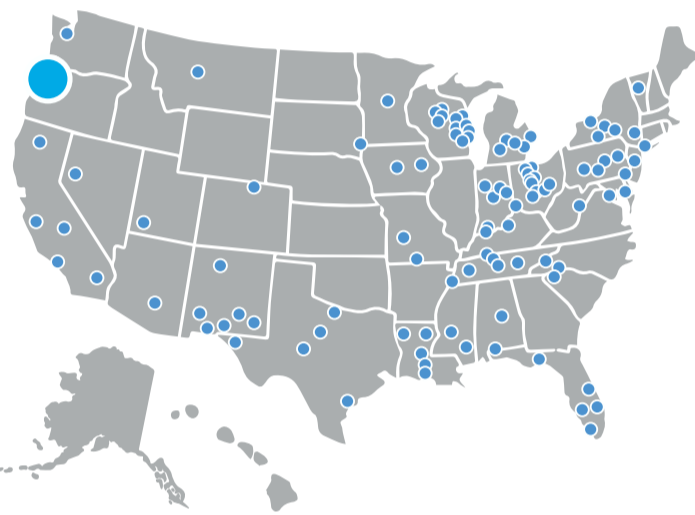
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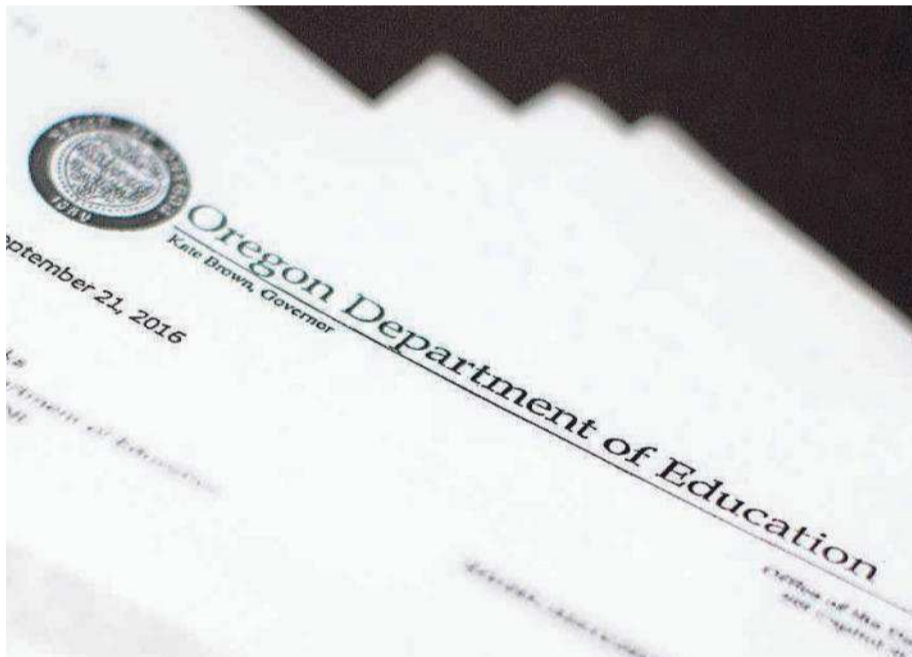


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An audit released Tuesday found the Oregon Department of Education should take additional steps to address the state's low graduation rate. OPB

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