

Health

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Virginia.

Student to mental health professional ratios are 'astoundingly bad' across US

One role schools play is in early intervention. Half of all mental illness presents itself before age 14.

"The earlier you intervene with effective treatment outcomes, the lower the cost, and the greater the opportunity for a life well-lived," said Angela Kimball of Inseparable, a mental health care policy advocacy group that spearheaded the report card. "The longer you wait, the worse outcomes. And typically when conditions get worse, they get more complex, and they get harder to treat."

But the vast majority of states lack the recommended ratios of school mental health professionals, including counselors, psychologists and social workers.

Only Idaho and Washington, D.C., exceed the nationally recommended ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students. In five states — West Virginia, Missouri, Texas, Alaska and Georgia — each school psychologist serves significantly more than 4,000 students.

Oregon falls on the higher end of that scale as well, with just one school psychologist per 3,393 students.

Access to school-based social workers is even worse: No state meets — let alone exceeds — the recommended ratio of one social worker for every 250 students. Oregon's rate is one social worker to 8,831 students.

Oregon has more school counselors available than the other two categories, with still just one counselor to 461 students, though.

"The ratios are so astoundingly bad it's almost inconceivable," Kimball said.

Understaffing is just one part of the problem. States tend to be lacking in other areas, too, according to the report — rarely do they require regular mental health screenings, for example, or fully leverage Medicaid dollars to fund certain services.

States are also inconsistent in their teacher training and school climate requirements. Culturally competent educators and healthy, inclusive school climates are especially important for marginalized populations such as LGBTQ+ youth.

"We all could be doing a better job in supporting the the needs and unique challenges experienced by LGBTQ young people," said Preston Mitchum of The Trevor Project, which provides crisis support to queer youth. Suicide-prevention training, LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula and policies honoring students' preferred pronouns contribute to healthier school climates.

Having at least one accepting adult can reduce the risk of a suicide attempt among LGBTQ young people by 40%.

Oregon has made changes in recent years to add funding for this purpose. In 2019, state lawmakers passed the Student Success Act, which promised a \$2 billion investment in children and schools every two years, with a portion going to districts (in a Student Investment Account), a portion dedicated to early education, and a third portion for statewide initiatives, such as the LGBTQ2SIA+ Student Success plan.

This was impacted by COVID-19 as well, with legislators cutting a portion of the funds in 2020 for other needs. However, districts still received millions of dollars in state funding to support these changes.

Funds granted to districts from the Student Investment Account (created through the SSA) are only allowed to go toward certain targets: reducing class size, instructional time, health and safety and well-rounded education. This includes hiring more school psychologists or counselors to help with student mental health, which some have utilized the funding for.

New Jersey, Kansas, Virginia among few states to show marked progress

There are bright spots. New Jersey last year created a grant program that allows schools to do annual depression screenings on children in grades 7-12, for instance. And Kansas formed an advisory council that brings together lawmakers, family members and providers to guide the state board of education on student mental health.

Another area that's seen some progress is mental health education. While many states include mental health as a topic in general health curricula, it often falls by the wayside. But some states have passed legislation that deepens the focus on mental health education, including Virginia and New York.

Waithe, the Virginia high schooler, is working on a project with Active Minds, one of the organizations in the coalition, to bring mental health education to young children in his area. By normalizing such conversations before they're in high school, the hope is they'll be better equipped to navigate their own mental health as they get older.

In addition to pushing for more robust mental health education, the Hopeful Futures Campaign is launching a website where students and parents can learn about policies in their area and how to effect change through petitions, letter-writing and other advocacy.

"When students know about mental health, they feel more empowered," Kimball said. "They feel better able to seek help."

Register-Guard reporter Jordyn Brown contributed to this report.

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skewed by one low or high price.

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Prices

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sale price because experts say the median offers a more accurate view of what's happening in a market. In finding the average price, all prices of homes sold are added and then divided by the number of homes sold. This measure can be

Oregon bill allowing more self-service gas advances

Connor Radnovich

Salem Statesman Journal

USA TODAY NETWORK

A bill that would allow more Oregonians to pump their own gas advanced out of committee despite concerns from lawmakers about the legislation's impact on people with disabilities, the elderly and gas station attendants.

After an amendment, House Bill 4151 would allow gas station owners to designate up to half of their pumps as self-service.

Opponents doubted there would be any substantive benefit for residents — other than to gas station owners who would not have to employ as many attendants — and were concerned gas stations would flout the rule capping self-service at only half of pumps.

Lawmakers also noted individuals who, by age or by disability, have trouble getting out of their vehicles would be harmed by this bill, and it would place more work upon those who are unfamiliar with the process of pumping gas.

"I hate this bill," Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, said. "I see this as corporate welfare writ large and I am very concerned about the long-term consequences."

Proponents of HB 4151 said it is long past time for Oregon to join 48 other states (other than New Jersey) where self-service of gasoline is the norm. Passing the bill, they said, would grant consumers a choice of service when refilling their vehicles and help alleviate some of the labor shortages plaguing gas stations.

They said that in some areas of the state, half of a gas station's pumps are unavailable for use because they only have one attendant, leading to long lines.

Lawmakers in support also noted the state has allowed residents in rural areas to pump their own gas in some form since 2016.

"When you walk into a store, you have the option of going through a clerk or checking out self-checkout," Rep. Rick Lewis, R-Silverton, said. "It's no different with self-service gas."

Despite support from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, the bill only advanced to the budget-writing Ways and Means committee after "courtesy

'yes' votes" from two Democratic lawmakers.

Lawmakers cast courtesy votes when they don't support a policy, but for various reasons want to allow the bill to move forward in the legislative process.

Those votes indicate that despite co-chief sponsorship by House Democratic Leader Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, and member of House Republican leadership Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Albany, the bill might not have the support to advance this session.

Timing is another issue — the Legislature must adjourn no later than March 7, per Constitutional rules.

But bipartisan work on the bill continued through Tuesday, including the introduction and adoption of an amendment that gained even the support of lawmakers opposed to the policy overall.

The amendment specified gas station owners may not designate more than half of their pumps for self-service and increased the civil penalty the State Fire Marshal could levy against gas stations to \$5,000 per day per violation.

The amendment also requires posted signage that shows which pumps are designated for self-service and lists the phone number for the State Fire Marshal for individuals to call if an attendant is not available to pump gas.

Enforcement of the law would fall onto individuals calling the State Fire Marshal, which was another aspect of the bill that concerned lawmakers. Oversight that relies on the individual instead of the state are rarely effective, they argued.

The threat of a \$5,000 fine is supposed to encourage compliance with the law.

Rep. Susan McLain, D-Hillsboro, noted that if the bill passed she might make it a hobby of driving around to different gas stations to see if they are complying with the law.

"Oregon's trying to do it differently. I really believe that we should give it an opportunity," McLain said. "Like every other bill, if it's not working we can update it, we can strengthen it, we can put more sideboards."

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Package

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home, in the hopes of building wealth among working families.

But the heart of the package is \$165 million for addressing homelessness, focused on giving nonprofits, local governments and existing programs additional funds to expand their services.

Of the \$165 million:

- \$80 million will address "immediate" need, including shelter infrastructure, rapid rehousing and referral services.

- \$50 million will go to Project Turnkey 2.0, which repurposes mostly hotels into shelters or housing.

- \$25 million will be split among nine local governments (including Salem) to be used for any number of needs in those communities to address homelessness.

"Salem is facing a homeless crisis, like communities across the state. It is our duty to address this crisis with urgency," Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, said in a statement. "Success will depend on coordination between state and local governments, and the flexibility for local communities like Salem to execute a distinct, regional solution. I'm proud to support this multifaceted approach."

The package falls in line with a pre-session request from Gov. Kate Brown for the Legislature to commit \$400 million toward affordable housing.

Trees

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The 2020 wildfires burned more than 1 million acres in Oregon, with private forestland accounting for more than 400,000 of those acres. Though large timberland owners often have big seedlings orders on reserve, small woodland owners can lack the same luxury.

But an immediate demand for seedlings from small landowners did not materialize quite the way some expected it would. Demand remains still high, but it's being stretched out.

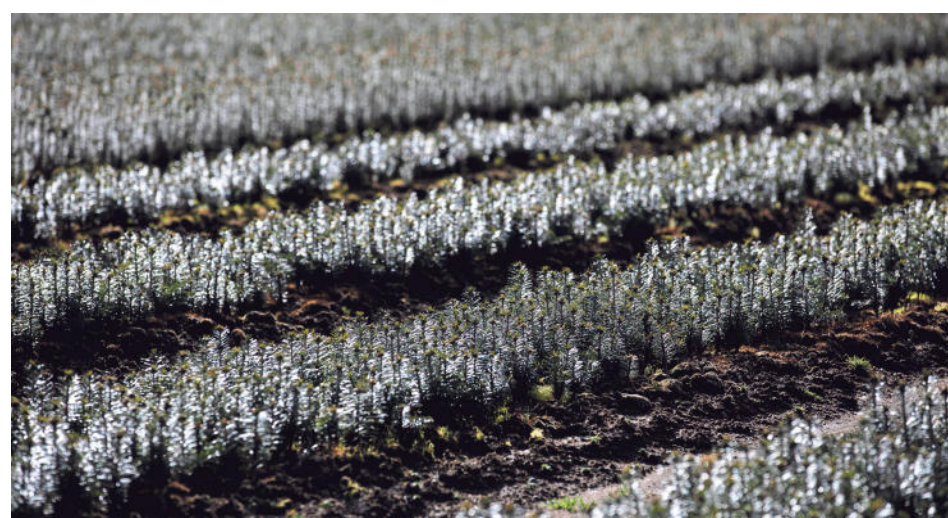
"The forecasted demand was going to be extremely significant," ODF Family Forest Land Coordinator Nate Agalzoff said. "We have more people that need them than are available, but the constraints and variables are, effectively, spreading that demand out."

Constraints and variables

The situation is now more complex than just a dearth of seedlings.

"It seems like the seedlings are available and some of the other bottlenecks are starting to play out," said Lauren Grand, a forester with OSU Extension Service in Lane County. "Nurseries and technical assistance providers expected a seedling shortage was going to be inevitable, so they prepared for that. Now we're working on the other bottlenecks that we didn't think about right away."

Many who prioritized rebuilding their homes and livelihoods over immediate reforestation found the woodlands quickly grew over with weeds and



Rows of seedlings wait to be harvested and processed at Brooks Tree Farm.

BRIAN HAYES/STATESMAN JOURNAL

other vegetation. Young timber trees wouldn't survive that competition, so many landowners aren't ready for seedlings.

"There's still a pending reforestation need on a given property, but now you have a bunch of competition vegetation that needs to be addressed," Agalzoff said. "If you say, 'I have trees for you next week,' they say they can't get a planting contractor on short notice or they still have a lot of work left to do to get a new canvas for their plantation."

Ahrens said many landowners haven't concluded salvage harvesting because loggers are busy statewide, and replanting efforts can't begin until the burned trees are cleared.

Though resources are available, Ahrens said not all landowners know about them.

"Right now, somewhat ironically, we have surplus seedlings from this effort that Oregon Department of Forestry and partners have undertaken. They ordered almost 400,000 seedlings in a hurry right after the fire," Ahrens said. "We're not able to get rid of all our trees this season because the landowners are not ready or haven't connected with us."

Nurseries react to demand

Kathy LeCompte, owner of Brooks Tree Farm north of Salem, said business is strong.

"I'm still getting calls everyday. That leads me to believe a lot of people out there are hunting for trees," she said. "We are still ramped up for large production for next year."

LeCompte said her nursery over the

past year shifted some production from Christmas trees in favor of timber trees because of their more immediate need in replanting efforts.

"The Douglas fir for this year, we were prepared to sell a lot more and we booked those orders. Our crop came in surplus with extra trees and we're selling those," she said.

Timber giant Weyerhaeuser grows its own seedlings for replanting after logging, but the 2020 wildfires left significant impacts on its timberlands requiring seedlings be planted.

"You look at the fire itself, both in terms of acreage and seedling demand, it was more than twice the impact to our company as the Mount St. Helen eruption. We're looking at 125,000 acres to reforest and somewhere between 35-40 million trees to do that," said Jeff Mehlschau, Weyerhaeuser's western regeneration team leader.

Weyerhaeuser nurseries in Oregon and Washington send out about 20 million seedlings each year to customers outside the company, from small landowners to other timber companies. The nurseries supply a nearly equal amount for the company's replanting.

Mehlschau said the company wants to have its lands reforested by spring 2024.

"We had to increase our internal production," Mehlschau said. "The roughly half of our production that goes outside of Weyerhaeuser ... we did not stop growing for somebody to grow more for Weyerhaeuser. We kept their space in our system available to them."

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