

Answering questions about curriculum

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Salem Statesman Journal
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What kids are learning in schools has been a discussion point for decades. But the topic has been brought to the forefront of national conversations in recent years and become increasingly politicized.

In Oregon, House Republicans introduced a bill in the 2022 short session that would have required all course curricula to be made public.

House Bill 4022 would have directed school boards to ensure the curriculum for each course offered was posted on the district website. Democratic legislative leaders never gave the bill a hearing or vote, essentially killing in the House Education Committee at the end of the session.

With the bill's death there are no laws to make curricula public. However, information is still available about what kids are learning in Oregon public schools. We reached out to local and state education officials to answer common questions about curricula and what students are learning.

What is curriculum and who sets it?

Curriculum refers to a series of "planned experiences" that students participate in so they can achieve proficiency in content and meet state standards for that topic. Lesson plans, discussion questions, assessments, homework assignments and more are all considered part of a course's curriculum, the Oregon Department of Education said.

ODE does not have or require specific curriculum — with one exception, tribal history. Decisions on everything else are left to individual districts, Marc Siegel, communications director for ODE, said.

And each district has a slightly different policy.

For example, in Central School District, board policy guides the district's selection of core program materials. Students, staff, parents and community members have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on any recommended instructional material before the school board votes to approve it, Emily Mentzer, district communications director, said.

Central is currently in the process of adopting a new Elementary Language Arts curriculum. A committee of district staff and community members

choose resources and material. After it is chosen, the materials will be shared at a school board meeting and community members will be able to provide feedback. Then, the school board will vote, Mentzer said.

What textbooks and books are used in classrooms?

The textbooks, books and digital materials allowed to be used in classrooms is decided by districts, in partnership with ODE.

ODE reviews and approves instructional material first. Then districts choose from that list or they can use a state-approved evaluation rubric to use non-approved materials, Siegel said.

In Central School District, supplementary materials and library resources are chosen by staff and principals, with assistance from students and families sometimes, Mentzer said.

What are my kids in Salem-Keizer learning?

Salem-Keizer school district posts the foundation of its elementary school curricula online. Links direct parents to information about language arts, math, health, science and SEL curricula.

For middle and high schoolers, Salem-Keizer does not post curriculum information online due to copyright laws, its website says. However, Salem-Keizer officials encourage families to contact teachers to discuss what is being taught in classes.

Some teachers at the middle and high school levels also have websites and syllabi outlining what they are covering.

What is the state's tribal history curriculum?

Oregon does require that public school students be taught lessons around tribal history, Siegel said.

In 2017, Senate Bill 13 was signed into law requiring educators to teach Tribal History/Shared History. Fourth, eighth and 10th-grade teachers are required to provide instruction based on "tribal approved essential understanding" in five subjects, including English, math and social sciences.

Lessons that teachers use have been created by ODE and local tribes, and vary in content by grade. For example, in 10th-grade history, there are lesson plans available on Indigenous People's Day and tribal sovereignty.

The state requires teachers to use these lessons, which are accessible

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online, Siegel said.

What are state education standards?

State standards help determine schools' curricula, as they break down what students should know how to do at each grade level and for each content area. Teacher panels review these standards every seven years and then they are adopted by the State Board, Siegel said.

Every content area from the social sciences and mathematics to the arts and physical education have standards broken down by grade level. As students progress through the grade levels, these standards become more complex.

For example in sixth-grade language arts, students learn to "read closely to determine what the text says explicitly" and to "cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking." By ninth grade, these students learn to analyze texts "explicitly as well as inferentially" and to cite "strong and thorough textual evidence" to support the analysis.

Schools have freedom around how they teach to these standards, but each educator works towards ensuring that their students meet them.

Have there been recent changes

to state standards?

The general standards are updated every seven years. However, more specialized changes can and do come from the Oregon Legislature.

In 2019, Senate Bill 664 was signed into law, requiring districts to teach students about the Holocaust and other instances of genocide. This law requires teachers to create and teach lessons that "prepare students to confront the immorality of the Holocaust, genocide and other acts of mass violence and to reflect on the causes," among other things.

Schools have freedom around how they teach these concepts, but they are required to address them and make sure that student knowledge meets the state standards.

Other requirements will be going into place over the next several years.

Starting in 2025, high schoolers will be required to take half a credit of civics education. The year after, Ethnic Studies and Inclusive Education will be implemented in Oregon social studies classes to "address the contributions" of different social and ethnic minorities across Oregon.

Just like Senate Bill 664, these requirements don't have to be taught one specific way, but students will work to meet a blanket set of standards.

What are 'ghost guns'? Here's what you should know

Virginia Barreda

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Last month, federal agents stumbled upon what they called Oregon's largest privately-made firearm — "ghost gun" — manufacturing workshop in the basement of a South Salem home while serving a search warrant. Salem police said they have seen an increase in appearances of these self-made guns in their investigations over the past several months.

While the phenomenon may be relatively recent in Salem, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) officials say the number of ghost guns appearing across the nation has risen steadily over the past several years.

Gun violence prevention advocates and law enforcement officials have sounded the alarm on ghost guns. Their untraceable nature, they say, makes them easily acquired by criminals who otherwise would not be permitted to possess a firearm and nearly impossible for law enforcement to track.

Here are some things to know about these untraceable guns:

What is a ghost gun?

A ghost gun, also called a privately-made firearm by law enforcement or "kit gun," is an unserialized, homemade firearm built from parts that are widely available for purchase without a background check.

ATF-licensed gunmakers or importers are required to engrave identification information, including a serial number, make and model, to a traditionally-manufactured firearm. Serial numbers are the best way for law enforcement to trace these guns to their first retail purchaser when investigating a crime, according to ATF public information officer Jason Chudy.

But since ghost guns are made using kits and incomplete parts of a firearm they are not required to have a serial number under federal law.

Similarly, those buying and selling the components for ghost guns are not required to undergo a background check. U.S. Department of Justice officials, as well as gun violence prevention advocates, say this makes them easily acquired by criminals who otherwise would not be permitted to possess a firearm and

nearly impossible for law enforcement to track.

"And that's the main reason they're referred to as 'ghost guns' — because you can't tell where they came from," Chudy said.

Are ghost guns legal?

Federal law allows a person to make a firearm for personal use, Chudy said, unless that individual is otherwise prohibited from possessing a firearm. If someone is a convicted felon, they are not allowed to possess a firearm.

Chudy said he was unaware of any federal law that limits the number of firearms an individual can manufacture for personal use.

Any person who is in the business of making guns to sell them must obtain a federal firearm license to do so, he said. The seller is required to serialize the firearms, as well as follow other requirements that make the weapon traceable.

These laws were determined by the Gun Control Act of 1968. The act, which came after the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., imposes licensing and regulation on the firearms industry, established new categories of firearms offenses, and prohibits the sale of firearms and ammunition to felons and certain other prohibited persons, according to the ATF.

How are ghost guns made?

Ghost guns are most frequently purchased and assembled from kits. They can also be 3D-printed.

A key component to a firearm is called a frame or "receiver," which houses the firing mechanism. Under federal law, only a frame or receiver of a firearm must carry a serial number. And anyone purchasing a receiver is subject to a background check, according to Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

"Unfinished frames and receivers are often marketed as "80%" complete, meaning a buyer needs to do only 20% of the work for the frame or receiver to be assembled into an operable firearm," according to a report by Everytown for Gun Safety, a national gun violence prevention organization.

Chudy says it's perfectly legal and easy to buy firearm components, includ-

ing a frame and receiver, from a legitimate retailer.

"Anybody can go online and just type up 80% receiver and you'll find stores legally able to sell them," he said.

Privately-made firearms can also be created using new manufacturing technologies such as 3D printing, which allows a person to produce a three-dimensional object much in the way that a traditional printer can produce a printed document, according to Giffords. "A high-quality, easy-to-use model is available for about \$2,500, roughly the cost of a high-end AR-15-style rifle. Entry-level 3D printers are available for under \$200."

Why is a serial number on a gun important and what happens when there isn't one?

Firearms' serial numbers are key investigative tools for police. When law enforcement officials recover a firearm at a crime scene, they use serial numbers to trace the weapon back to the owner and retailer.

The ATF's National Tracing Center (NTC) traces firearms associated with crimes and provides investigative leads for local, state, federal and foreign law enforcement agencies. Officials say 490,800 trace requests were processed in the fiscal year 2020.

In Oregon, 5,288 firearms were recovered during investigations and traced in 2020, according to the ATF. Salem was ranked third among Oregon cities for firearm recovery in 2020, with 335. Portland holds the number one spot with 1,121 firearms recovered; Eugene holds the second with 353.

Without a serial number, guns are harder for police to trace.

"What we have to do is figure out if it was recovered from someone, where they got that firearm from and basically work the process backward," Chudy said.

Salem police officials said they're not immune to this problem. Detectives added because they're harder to trace, there are additional "complications" in training investigators and evidence techs to properly document PMFs for entry into databases.

How often are ghost guns used in crimes?

In recent years, the number of ghost

guns recovered from crime scenes across the country has increased.

Nearly 24,000 suspected ghost guns were recovered by law enforcement from potential crime scenes from Jan. 1, 2016, through Dec. 31, 2020 and reported to the ATF, according to a report written by Attorney General Merrick B. Garland on behalf of the Department of Justice. This includes ghost guns recovered from 325 homicides or attempted homicides.

The numbers are rising in some municipalities. In 2019, 6% of the firearms recovered by the San Francisco Police Department in connection with homicides were ghost guns. Last year it topped 44%, according to the lawsuit filed by the city district attorney's office.

New York County hasn't had as many ghost gun cases as San Francisco, but they have doubled in the last two to three years, said Cyrus Vance Jr., the Manhattan chief prosecutor. In 2020, the New York City Police Department recovered 225 ghost guns through Dec. 3, surpassing the 145 recovered in 2020. In 2019, officers recovered just 48.

Ghost guns have also been used in at least three mass shootings in recent years: A 2013 shooting in Santa Monica, California, that left five people dead, a 2017 shooting in Tehama County, California, that left four people dead and a 2019 shooting in Santa Clarita, California, that left two students at Saugus High School dead.

Have efforts been made to regulate ghost guns?

Gun control advocates and some law enforcement officials alike have sounded the alarm over ghost guns, which they say is a growing threat to public safety.

According to Giffords, 10 states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington) and the District of Columbia have enacted laws to at least partially address the undetectable or untraceable guns.

USA Today's Kevin McCoy and Ryan W. Miller contributed to this report.

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