

Auditors

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Student Success Act as schools prep funding plans

With COVID-19 impacts, looming changes in locally elected leadership and unaddressed critiques from past audits, officials said, they want to call attention to these possible issues before they become widespread problems.

"While most audits look at the past, ... this systemic risks analysis and report is designed to head off problems before they occur," Oregon Secretary of State Shemia Fagan said at a news conference.

"We need to not see a gap for students of color," she said. "We need to not see a gap for students who don't speak English as a first language. We need to not see a gap for students who are in high poverty schools or high poverty communities."

Oversight and support

The 2019 act, which focused on im-

proving results for low-income and historically underserved students, set new accountability standards and established a corporate activities tax to provide new revenue to K-12 education statewide.

It placed a large amount of control in the hands of local districts, allowing them to prioritize spending their allocations on issues most important to their communities. But it also expanded ODE's capacity for oversight and district support.

Background: How Salem-Keizer Public Schools spent its first year of Student Investment Account money

Oregon principal auditor Scott Learn said the audit team's focus in the latest report – specifically described as not an audit – is to ensure Oregon leadership is focused on the statewide plan, not "adding a lot of new complexities to the work that ODE and districts have to do."

To be more successful than past efforts, auditors said, "strong state leader monitoring" and support of the Oregon Department of Education are crucial.

State leaders must ensure the state education department closely monitors and reports on school district perfor-

mance, effectively scrutinizes district spending and quickly discloses challenges in program implementation, auditors said. They also suggest state leaders must think long-term instead of generating multiple, separate programs and priorities for the state education department and districts to address.

Other suggested actions include increasing standards for rapidly growing online schools, authorizing the Department of Education to collect student data to increase high school graduation rates and supporting ODE's efforts to improve K-12 standards and ensure districts are complying with them.

Here are the five risks auditors identified as key potential areas of weakness, as presented in the report:

Risk #1: "Performance Monitoring and Support" – Performance monitoring is crucial to school improvement. State leaders and policymakers must work with ODE to ensure monitoring of district performance and state support when needed to promote success.

Risk #2: "Transparency on Results and Challenges" – To foster accountability and timely adjustments, leaders and policymakers must require thor-

ough reporting of school improvement results and challenges.

Risk #3: "Spending Scrutiny and Guidance" – Leaders and policymakers should support ODE in providing more analysis of school district spending, helping districts focus spending on student support and offset rising costs.

Risk #4: "Clear, Enforceable District Standards" – Oregon's Division 22 standards for K-12 schools lack clarity and enforceability, allowing low performance to persist. To increase accountability for state funds and student success, leaders and policymakers must balance local control of school districts with reasonable, enforceable standards.

Risk #5: "Governance and Funding Stability" – Reforming education is a complex, long-term effort, requiring leaders and policymakers to set clear goals and foster a long-term focus. A large number of separate programs, unrealistic timelines, and frequent changes in funding priorities and leadership can undermine reform efforts.

Read the full report at <https://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Pages/recent.aspx>.



Evelyn Klopfenstein, 13, spends time with Emmy Arana and the horses at Acres of Hope on in Salem. The non-profit organization allows youth going through mental health struggles and trauma to connect with horses as a way to heal. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Ranch

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and a kid that just can't even talk --- they're so anxious or there's something bad going on in their life or at school ... they just open up and start talking for hours straight and not even realize it," said Justin, who works as the ranch's facilities manager.

Acres of Hope opened in July of 2020, but CEO and session coordinator Emmy said the vision for the program was prompted by God seven years ago. The organization initially launched on a 5-acre property the couple owned in West Salem before they purchased their current ranch property.

Arana, who dealt with trauma as a teenager, said she was able to connect most with her faith being with horses. As a former middle school teacher, Arana said she has a special place for teens.

"Middle school, high school, and even into college is a pivotal time in your life," Arana said. "They don't want to be micro-managed, they don't want to be told what to do. They just want to save space for somebody to hear them, and they will change the world. They are thinkers, they're authentic, they're genuine."

There's a great need for services for teens, she said, and the stressors of the pandemic added an extra layer of challenges.

"There's a lot right now, unfortunately, going on in the mental health world with teens and depression, so we love hanging out with these kids," Arana said.

Word of the program has spread like wildfire. Within three or four months of opening, Emmy and Justin had to start putting teens on a waitlist. The program currently has 46 youth; another 45 are on a waitlist.

More recently, the organization has started getting referrals from school counselors, Salem Health hospital, doctors, clinics, parents, and a handful of counseling offices.

To apply, families fill out a form online explaining their situation and Arana sends families the waitlist form. Anxiety and bullying at school are among some of the top issues, Arana said.

Arana will prioritize kids on the waitlist with the most "acute" cases.

The ranch offers three programs, depending on the youth's needs. Individual sessions pair the teen with a mentor and horses; group sessions allow teens to interact with peers; and teen time is an evening bible study program.

Mentors, also called session leaders, meet with youth once a week allowing



Emmy Arana takes the reins off Kimber. Kimber is one of several horses used in a non-profit organization that allows youth going through mental health struggles and trauma to connect with horses as a way to heal. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

them to talk and develop a relationship while the teen spends time with horses.

During sessions, the teens are taught how to halter, lead and care for a horse.

Justin and Emmy say while horses cannot speak, they have the ability to communicate with the teens by responding to their actions and emotions.

"A horse is a mirror to your soul," Emmy said. "The horse is going to respond to what the youth brings to the table, whether it is timidity, whether it's overconfidence, whether it's too much energy."

"And so we get to look at their emotional awareness, regulation and confidence. The horse needs a leader because they're a herd animal," she said.

At the start of their mentorship, the teens fill out a self-evaluation form to identify areas that they believe need improvement, such as self-esteem, responsibility, self-control and independence. The youth measure their growth by revisiting the form periodically.

The length of time the teen spends in the program varies depending on their needs. Teens may "graduate" to group sessions or start coming every other

week. Most teens are in the program for about a year.

Since the program is a ministry, Emmy Arana says another hope is for teens to develop a relationship with Jesus, though there is no expectation.

"It's a place for them to relax and take a deep breath and disconnect, and be able to have conversations with people who will listen," Justin said. "It's extremely therapeutic."

Emmy Arana said Acres of Hope is meant to be paired with other types of counseling and resources for children and families. And while it's "therapeutic," the ranch is not meant to be therapy or diagnose a child.

"Acres of Hope is not going to fix the world," she said. "Acres of Hope isn't a one-stop-shop. We have this hope that all these other organizations that are doing amazing things in our community --- we all work together ... and refer these kids to other services that can be helpful."

The couple said the organization has so far stayed afloat, and has kept the program free to families, thanks to donations and support from the commu-

nity.

Justin estimates the cost for one session averages \$75 to \$100, but donors and sponsors, such as The Angels in the Outfield, help cover sessions for teens.

"We're just now being able to show true impact," Justin said. "We're literally saving kids' lives."

Acres of Hope Youth Ranch

Interested in signing up for the mentorship program? Interested youth may apply for the program at acresofhopeyouthranch.org/our-program.

To donate to Acres of Hope Youth Ranch, visit acresofhopeyouthranch.org/donate. Those interested in signing up to volunteer with the organization, can visit acresofhopeyouthranch.org/volunteer.

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