

# SCHOOLS

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could never get them reengaged,” Elgin Superintendent Dianne Greif said. “Because of the small size of our graduating class, those two students knocked our grad rate down significantly.”

Greif said the district has enhanced its student contact regarding graduating and requirements with more personnel to address where students are in the process of meeting graduation requirements.

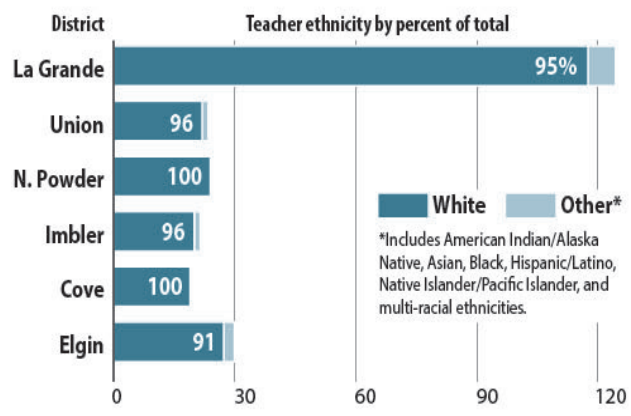
“It is our hope to not be shut down for COVID reasons again this year,” she continued, “but if that happens, we will hope to keep all seniors engaged and working toward graduation.”

## Enrollment data

La Grande school district, the largest district in Union County, has 2,348 students, with 81% white, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 6% multiracial and 2% or less American Indian, Asian, Black or native Hawaiian.

“I would say that our diversity of race in our enrollment is somewhat reflective of the racial representation of our community,” La Grande Superintendent George Mendoza

# Union County teacher ethnicity by school district, 2019-20



Alan Kenega/Contributed Graphic

Union County teachers are predominantly white. However, La Grande and Elgin school districts have the most diversity on their staff.

said. “We are a microcosm of the community in general, and the data in general indicates that we have three out of six racial categories statistically the same.”

Other schools scored similarly, with the exception of RiverBend High School, an Oregon Department of Education Youth Correctional Education Program facility. The school provides education for high school students in the criminal justice system. The Oregon Department of Education reported 12 students were enrolled for the 2019-2020 academic year. Of these students, 17% were Black, 42% were

Hispanic/Latino, and 42% were white.

In Cove, which has 403 students, the district has an 89% majority of white students and 5% Hispanic/Latino students, 1% Asian and less than 1% Black.

“Due to a number of adoptions and kids moving to the district due to closures in their previous communities, our enrollment reflects a higher racial diversity this year than is reflected in community data as a whole,” Cove Superintendent Earl Pettit said. “The racial diversity of our student body continues to broaden.”

The demographics of the

# Union County teacher retention by school, 2019-20

School	Teachers	Avg. percent retention
La Grande H.S.	34	90%
La Grande M.S.	26	91
Central Elementary	26	92
Greenwood Elementary	16	94
Island City Elementary	18	86
Union H.S.	11	97
Union Elementary	10	88
Elgin H.S.	12	87
Stella Mayfield Elementary	17	83
N. Powder Charter School	23	95
Cove Charter School	19	92
Imbler Charter School	21	97

Alan Kenega/Contributed Graphic

Union County schools have a high rate of retention for their teachers. Several superintendents say having good communication and relationships between the district and families helps keep staff at the district.

other Union County schools are similar to county-wide data on race, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

## Educator data

The La Grande school district has 124 teachers in its five schools and a 91% average retention rate. Other districts in Union County had similar or higher retention rates for the school year, with the exception of Elgin, which had an average of 80% of teachers return.

“About half are past the 15-year mark and half are under,” Greif said of Elgin’s staff. “This would

be a reflection on current hiring within the last 10 years, and retirement, also within the last 10 years. As staff retire they are typically replaced by new staff, those with less years experience.”

North Powder Superintendent Lance Dixon said the family atmosphere of the district is what keeps teachers from leaving.

“We are a family,” Dixon said. “I have always encouraged staff to put their family first and we all understand that we have to take care of ourselves in order to help others. I think that philosophy goes

a long way in encouraging people to commit to the district long term.”

North Powder and Cove school districts had the least amount of diversity in their teaching staff. The districts have 100% white teachers, while the other districts in Union County have a mix of white, Asian, Hispanic and Black teachers, though the majority of the teachers in those districts are white.

Dixon said the trend of hiring for the district is in line with the community and application pool the district receives. Mendoza said La Grande’s hiring also is in line with the community, but the district is working toward maintaining a well-cultured education through partnering with Eastern Oregon University’s “Grow Your Own” program.

“These programs are built around the premise of culturally responsive instruction and are aligned to having future teachers from our region who wish to stay and work in our region,” Mendoza said. “We do look at equity and diversity in our school system in general and take action to be equity driven and culturally responsive to student and staff needs.”

# COUNCIL

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housing situation after completing that review.

Miesner’s ongoing goals include finding ways for the cities of Union County to work together to help each other because she said everyone benefits when a town does well.

“If a new business moves into Island City, it will help La Grande by drawing more customers here,” she said, as an example.

While La Grande City Council positions are non-partisan, Dutto, fellow councilor Nicole Howard and La Grande Mayor Steve Clements were the subjects of a recent accusatory rant on the website for the Union County Republican Central Committee based on their registration as Democrats. Miesner said she opposes efforts to encourage councilors to follow agendas of their political parties or to attack or support council candidates on the assumption they hold views that conform to their parties.

“I believe it is important to be fair and open-minded and strive to meet the needs of all citizens, period,” Miesner said. “I believe all of our current city councilors are honest, fair and very open-minded.”

Alf Rippee said if voters choose her, she will work to boost the business climate and create a safer environment for students walking to school.

She said she is concerned about students who live in areas such as those east of Fourth Street who walk to either La Grande Middle School, La Grande High School or Central Elementary School. The candidate said many of these students have to walk in areas where there are no sidewalks or crosswalks.

Funding for additional crosswalks and sidewalks, Alf Rippee said, might be available from the national Safe Routes to School pro-

## MORE LA GRANDE CITY COUNCIL RACE COVERAGE COMING

- Four seats are up for election on the La Grande City Council. Previous editions featured the contests between La Grande Mayor Steve Clements and challenger Alex McHadded as well as the councilor race between incumbent Corrine Dutto and challenger Dr. David Glabe.
- Saturday’s edition will conclude coverage of the candidates for the city council.

gram. The challenger said she wants to help make sure the city is doing all it can and to use all the resources it has available to help businesses being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I want to keep the downtown vibrant,” she said.

Alf Rippee said she finds the new businesses coming into town an encouraging sign, as well as how La Grande’s Urban Renewal Agency is assisting them.

Alf Rippee has lived in Northeast Oregon since 2001 and has resided in Umatilla, Wallowa and Malheur counties. She and her family first lived in Emigrant Springs about a decade ago where her husband, Matt, worked for the Oregon State Parks Department. Alf Rippee said they and their four daughters made trips from there to La Grande to enjoy its parks, library and swimming pool.

Alf Rippee and her family have lived in La Grande for four and a half years. Her public service record includes years serving as a volunteer for Girl Scouts, the La Grande Swim Club and La Grande High School.

She also contended the partisan involvement in the La Grande city council races is a non-issue. She believes city council decisions should be and are made based on process and research.

# CAMPING

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the Wallowa-Whitman to keep 95% of fees collected at most recreation sites to operate, maintain and improve sites on the forest.

Fees pay for work such as pumping and cleaning toilets, the most expensive task at most sites, according to the Wallowa-Whitman.

Of the forest’s 248 recreation sites, 65 require fees now.

At Pittsburg Landing campground, on the Snake River in Hells Canyon, the Wallowa-Whitman has collected less than \$10,000 per year over the past 3 years, while the average maintenance cost for the campground has been \$30,000 per year. That doesn’t include the cost of a new drinking water system, paving and building renovation at the site.

The Wallowa-Whitman also noted that since 2005, when fees were last increased, the federal cost of living index has increased by 36%, Oregon’s minimum wage has risen from \$7.15 to \$11.50 in the part of the state that includes the Wallowa-Whitman.

The cost to hire a contractor to pump toilets has nearly doubled during that period, officials said.

Comments on the proposal are due by Nov. 15. Commenting options:

- Email to sm.fs.wnwf-webmail@usda.gov (include “fee proposal” in the subject line)
- Phone: 541-805-2769 (leave a voicemail with your full name, ZIP code and email address)
- Mail comments to: Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, Attention: Recreation Program Manager, 1550 Dewey Ave., Suite A, Baker City, OR 97814.

# DISTRICT 58

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she values at least reaching across the aisle to have conversations to accomplish goals for the district.

“The way I approach things is I like to have a conversation,” she said. “I like to sit down across the table and visit with them to see if we can find some common ground to work in.”

Bylenga is a 2016 graduate of Pendleton High School and is finishing a degree in political science at Portland State University this fall. He’s had to justify his place in the race to some due to his age, but Bylenga believes his perspective can also be a benefit to mending the hyperpolarization of state and national politics in recent years.

“There needs to be some type of culture



Bylenga



Levy

change,” he said. “We have to have common respect in the Legislature, and that’s something I want to at least be able to bring.”

While some of Bylenga’s positions align with Levy’s and other conservative positions popular in Eastern Oregon — such as protecting the Second Amendment and small businesses from arduous regulation or taxation — the two candidates diverge on their top priorities.

Levy’s campaign has been endorsed by a number of political action committees devoted to representing the interests of natural resource and agricultural businesses,

## ONLINE

For more election coverage, and to read a longer version of this story, go to [lagrandeobserver.com](http://lagrandeobserver.com).

such as Ag-PAC, the Oregon Farm Bureau and Timber Unity PAC.

The Corporate Activities Tax began in 2020 at a rate of 0.57% for all businesses that exceed \$1 million in annual revenue. Funds raised from the tax were being used to fund the Student Success Act for education throughout the state.

“I’ve had a lot of private citizens and business owners talk to me about it and how it’s negatively impacting their business,” Levy said.

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