

OUR VIEW

What should Oregon's graduation requirements be?

Some high school graduates are proficient in calculus while others struggle with algebra. Some graduates can write complex sentences without pondering the mysteries of clauses, while others can't distinguish between the passive and active voices.

But despite the range in accomplishments, it's hardly an extreme notion that Oregon students should demonstrate basic abilities in math and writing before they receive a diploma.

Beyond the obvious reason — after 12 years in school, students ought to be capable of proving they've learned a certain amount in those two subjects — to distribute diplomas to students who lack these skills is to set them on a potential path of frustration and failure, particularly if they go to college.

But Oregon's Democrat-controlled Legislature thinks differently.

Lawmakers recently passed Senate Bill 744, which now awaits Gov. Kate Brown's signature. The bill will suspend for the next three years the Essential Skills graduation requirement, and it directs the state Department of Education to evaluate how Oregon determines graduation requirements.

An evaluation is reasonable.

But it's hardly necessary to waive the current requirements while evaluating them.

Oregon initially suspended the Essential Skills requirement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many students in the state have taken mostly, or only, online classes.

That suggests, if nothing else, that "comprehensive distance learning" wasn't especially comprehensive.

Another flaw in the concept is that it ignores the reality that most students preparing to graduate were subjected to distance learning for less than a year and a half. Surely it's not too much to expect that many of those students would have acquired the necessary skills to show proficiency even before computer monitors replaced actually classrooms.

An organization that supports the bill, Foundations for a Better Oregon, said in a statement that "An inclusive and equitable review of graduation and proficiency requirements, when guided by data and grounded in a commitment to every student's success, will promote shared accountability and foster a more just Oregon."

That statement falls squarely within the category of "sounds nice but what, exactly, does it mean?"

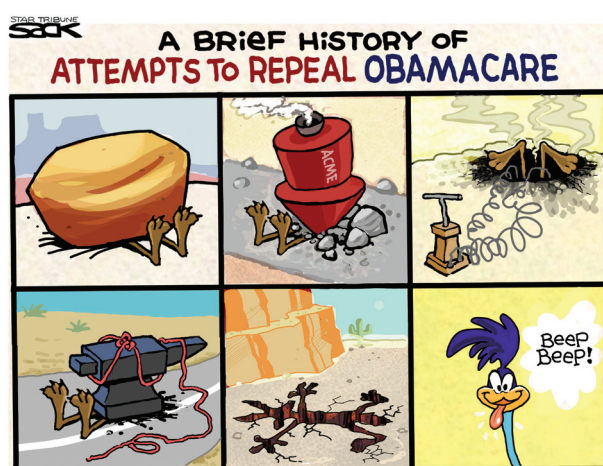
First, why would any review of graduation requirements be anything except "inclusive and equitable" if the same standards, as they do now, apply to all students?

Second, what evidence is there that the current graduation requirements are not "grounded in a commitment to every student's success?" What else would they be grounded in? The entire purpose of graduation requirements is to ensure that students have learned what they need to learn to have a chance to be successful.

The last part of the sentence from Foundations for a Better Oregon is even more perplexing. What does "shared accountability" mean in this context? That schools are responsible for teaching, and students for learning? If so, just say that.

It's a laudable goal to improve Oregon's graduation requirements. High school diplomas should have relevance; they should ensure that the students who receive one have, during the preceding years, learned enough to pursue a productive life as an adult.

But suspending such requirements, even for a few years, is more likely to hurt students, by awarding them diplomas that imply a level of education that they haven't actually attained.



Prescribed fires help take heat off



SEN. RON WYDEN
OTHER VIEWS

It was 102 degrees in Medford on June 1, 2021. Let me say that again just in case it didn't fully sink in — Medford suffered temperatures as high as 102 degrees in spring, making it harder for firefighters battling Southern Oregon's first fires of the year.

Now, I usually like Oregon to be in the record-setting business, but not for hot, dry weather in April and May. Having a 100-degree day while still in spring-time should ring alarm bells for Oregonians everywhere.

It was not so long ago that Oregon's fire season was only a few weeks in August and September. The events of Memorial Day weekend only serve as a reminder that the human-caused climate crisis has increased the frequency of fires that threaten lives, businesses and entire communities.

Over the past week, I met with forest managers and first responders in Southern Oregon,

Central Oregon, and the Willamette Valley to hear their forecasts for the 2021 fire year.

The bottom line is it's long past time for nickel-and-dime solutions to billion-dollar problems caused by wildfire, such as smoke-related health issues, damage to local economies and life-and-death threats to Oregonians.

Our state has a backlog of roughly 2.5 million acres of federal land in dire need of wildfire prevention. And Oregonians don't want 2.5 million excuses about why there aren't more forest health improvements and prescribed fire treatments completed on these 2.5 million acres.

They just want these fire risks reduced as soon as possible.

The science is clear: controlled burns clear out dead trees and vegetation as well as break down and return nutrients to the soil, creating healthier and more resilient forests. Prescribed burns or fuel reduction treatments can head off wildfires before they have the chance to burn out of control, devastating lives and livelihoods.

I saw this firsthand in Sisters, where a prescribed burn near the Whychus Creek provided key

support in suppressing the 2017 Milli fire before it could overtake Sisters.

To that end, I recently introduced legislation to increase the pace and scale of prescribed fires. The National Prescribed Fire Act has the support of conservation groups as well as leading timber industry voices because its passage would mean healthier forests for timber harvest, forest ecosystems and outdoor recreation alike.

It's going to take all hands on deck to prevent wildfire in the coming dry seasons, so that's why I have introduced bills to harden our power grid by burying power lines, generate thousands of good-paying jobs for young people reducing fire-causing fuels in the woods, and meet emissions goals by investing in the clean energy sector.

Smart, science-based forestry policy is smart climate policy. If we treat hazardous, fire-starting fuels now in the cooler, wetter months, we can prevent future fires before they have a chance to spark.

Ron Wyden, a Democrat, represents Oregon in the U.S. Senate.

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