

GRADS

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“They do all they can to get them to what we call the promised land,” Wells said.

La Grande and Cove high schools posted almost identical graduation rates: 85.71% of Cove’s seniors graduated, up 1.5% from 2019-20, and La Grande graduated 85.99%, down from 89.89% the previous year.

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza said he is proud of how LHS students are doing in terms of graduating despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I’m just very pleased with our students. They’ve endured a challenging time and they’ve earned their diploma,” he said. “I’m very pleased and happy for them, and I have a lot of gratitude for our staff and our families that worked collaboratively to ensure the success of our students.”

Powder Valley High School’s graduation rate was 80%, which was down from 100% in 2019-20, while Elgin High School had a graduation rate of 71.43%, which was down from 82.76% in 2019-20.

State grad rates drop

The average four-year graduation rate in the state went from 83% for the class of 2020 to 81% for the class of 2021, which graduated more than 37,000 seniors. About 8,900 students didn’t graduate with their class.

This is despite a nearly 50% chronic absentee rate for high school seniors during the last school year, meaning nearly half of students missed more than 10% of their classes.

Jon Wiens, director of accountability and



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain, File

Enterprise graduates launch their caps skyward in celebration at the conclusion of their graduation ceremony Saturday, May 29, 2021. Enterprise School District had a graduation rate at 95.65% in 2020-21, up from 2019-20 when it posted a graduation rate of 85.37%.



Misty Johnson/Contributed Photo, File

Graduates of Union High School beam during the opening ceremony of the schools graduation commencement June 5, 2021. Union School District posted a graduation rate of 94.12% in 2020-21.

reporting at the Education Department, said teacher records of attendance were inconsistent between online and in-person instruction and between districts, calling into question

the accuracy of the high absentee figure.

Prior to the pandemic, regular school attendance rates in Oregon stood at about 80%.

High school gradua-

tion rates have picked up in Oregon since the second decade of the 2000s, increasing, overall, by one to three percentage points every year since about 2010. “It’s both a big deal

to thousands of students when the graduation rate is upward by two percentage points, and I think it’s a big deal to those students who do not graduate from high school when the graduation rate declines by two percentage points,” said David Liebowitz, a professor at the University of Oregon’s College of Education who studies education methods and policy.

When it comes to squaring a high absentee rate with only a slight decrease in the graduation rate, Marc Seigel, communications director at the Education Department wrote in an email, “The class of 2021 had nearly three years of in-person high school prior to the beginning of the pandemic. Many of these students were well on their path to graduation when

the pandemic began, and were able to maintain that momentum despite the challenges of the pandemic.”

No traditional four-year high school in Oregon experienced an increase in graduation rates by 10% or more. A mix of 43 traditional four-year high schools and charter schools had graduation rates of 100%. The lowest graduation rate in the state was at Southern Oregon Success Academy, an alternative school near Grants Pass, which graduated just one of its 48 seniors.

Overall, about 40% of Oregon’s 539 high schools had graduation rates below the state average. About 100 had rates below 70%, and about half of those were alternative schools or virtual charters.

According to Liebowitz, “Just a small subset of schools can have a major impact on the state’s overall graduation rate. A very small number of schools contribute to a lot of the high school dropouts around the state.”

Oregon’s dropout rate in 2021 was just under 2%, according to data from the Education Department.

Liebowitz said it’s hard to pinpoint any one reason for a decline or increase in graduation rates in an individual year, but a loss of two percentage points in graduation rate means thousands of students.

“I think that the right way to think about this is to think about the individual students who are on the margin completing, or not completing, high school and the life opportunities that implies for them if they do or don’t complete high school,” he said.

— Oregon Capital Chronicle reporter Alex Baumhardt contributed to this report.

SESSION

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SB 554 during the 2021 legislative session,” the Senate bill Gov. Kate Brown signed in 2021 that regulated firearm storage and banned guns at the state Capitol and Portland International Airport.

The law also allows school boards to ban guns on school grounds. He said he would support legislation that would “establish liability for specific crimes committed in ‘gun-free zones.’”

Smith also said he is going to focus on middle-income housing, according to the press release, which he called “District 57’s most pressing housing need.”

He also pointed out the importance of the Interstate 5 bridge, which connects Oregon and Washington, as “critical” to the Port of Morrow and other ports in his district.

“As a member of the Joint I-5 Bridge Committee, I support the new bridge and will be intimately involved in its development,” he stated.

Protecting Eastern Oregon livestock from predators, education funding, behavioral health, curbing the governor’s emergency powers and returning people to “normal” life also are on Smith’s agenda.

Hansell to address two issues in Senate

While he waits for his proposals to become bills through legislative counsel, Hansell said he hopes to use the two bills he’s allowed



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting, File

Sen. Lynn Findley, left, R-Vale, conferences with Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, on the Senate floor at the Oregon State Capitol on Tuesday, May 18, 2021. Entering the 2022 legislative session, Hansell said one of the issues he’s keeping an eye on is the push to lift the overtime exemption for agricultural workers.

to submit this session, addressing illegal marijuana grows in Southern Oregon and medical mergers and acquisitions.

Hansell said he’s a part of a bipartisan group of

legislators looking to pass a number of bills to assist Southern Oregon, a region Hansell said is being

inundated with drug cartels and other bad actors operating illegal marijuana farms. While his bill likely would fund operations far outside his Northeastern Oregon base, Hansell said the impacts could be felt locally if the Legislature fails to take action.

“If you don’t stop it there, it’s coming to you,” he said.

Hansell is focusing his other bill on amending a law passed last year that requires the state to approve many health care provider mergers and acquisitions before

he’s working with hospital groups to change the law. If the law isn’t changed, Hansell said it could cause rural health care providers to shut down rather than seek out a merger that could keep them open.

Besides the bills he’s sponsoring, Hansell said one of the issues he’s keeping an eye on is the push to lift the overtime exemption for agricultural workers. Hansell said such a law would lead employers to cut hours and would hurt producers.

Some hot takes on upcoming session

Smith said he is looking forward to the upcoming session.

“The 2021 legislative session was a long and difficult session coupled with a full reconstructive shoulder surgery that

I dealt with,” Smith stated. “This session, I am hoping to see many constituents in Salem again because, unlike last session, the Capitol is slated to be open to the public.”

Levy also expressed positivity about the session, even if it’s no longer doing what Oregonians intended it for.

“This short session was meant to fix budget shortfalls,” she said, “and there’s nothing in my bill or anyone else’s bill who I’m sponsoring that’s a budget shortfall — except, perhaps the \$1 million ask, because we don’t have enough money in that compensation fund — but I sure hope we get them all passed. I always am an optimistic person.”

She even said she, a Republican, might vote for a Democrat as the next speaker to replace the out-

going speaker, Rep. Tina Kotek, D-Portland.

House Democrats selected Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, to be their nominee as speaker. As Democrats have the majority, Rayfield likely will gain the office. While Levy said she did not know him well, she credited him for being experienced, moderate and logical.

She said Rayfield has, in previous work, “spread the money around the state,” which she said she appreciated because Portland should not get everything they want.

“He’s an equitable person in that regard,” she said. “I’m looking forward to getting to know him better.”

While she is considering voting for Rayfield as speaker, she said she needs to confer with her caucus first.



Hansell

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