

SCHOOLS

Continued from Page A1

Guidelines by the Oregon Department of Education for limiting the spread of COVID-19 included separating cohorts, part-time school with remote elements, or completely remote learning environments — known as Comprehensive Distance Learning, or CDL — in the case of a localized outbreak at a school.

A mixed bag

At the individual school level, results were mixed. Pendleton High School — the flagship of the Umatilla County School District — fell from 90.4% the previous year to 78.5% in 2020-21, a drop of 11.9%. It was among the highest decreases among larger schools in Northeastern Oregon.

“The drop in our data, it’s obviously disappointing, because there’s student names tied to all of those numbers,” Matt Yoshioka, Pendleton’s director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, told the East Oregonian on Wednesday, Jan. 19. “It was certainly a hard year.”

Schools that recorded a lower graduation rate are Burnt River School, North Powder Charter School, Umatilla High School, Pendleton High School, Elgin High School, McLoughlin High School, Baker High School, Weston-McEwen High School, Baker Web Academy, Union High School, Stanfield Secondary School, Pilot Rock High School, La Grande High School and Joseph Charter School.

Schools that saw an increase in graduation rates were Cove Charter School, Riverside Junior/Senior High School, Grant Union Junior/Senior High School, Nixyaawii Community School, Heppner Junior/Senior High School, Hermiston High School, Irrigon Junior/Senior High School, Burns High School, Ione School District, Wallowa High School, Echo School, Hawthorne Alternative High School, Enterprise High School, Imbler Charter School, Huntington School and Pine Eagle Charter School.

Umatilla High School saw the largest decrease

in graduation rates among schools with more than 100 seniors, with a drop of 12%. Hermiston High School saw the largest increase for the same category with an increase of 4.2%.

Eight schools had a graduation rate of 100%, while 18 schools had a graduation rate at or above 90%. Of the 37 schools in Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Grant counties, only nine had graduation rates lower than the state average.

On the rise

Graduation rates for Oregon as a whole have been increasing steadily over the past decade. In 2010, the graduation rate — that is, the four-year graduation rate — was just over 66%, one of the lowest in the nation. That number climbed steadily until it hit its all-time high in 2020, when the state graduated more than 82% of its seniors.

The 2021 record high still falls short from the rest of the nation. The average high school graduation rate in the U.S. was 86% in 2019, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, and was more than 4% higher than Oregon’s rates. Oregon consistently ranks lower than other states when it comes to high school graduations.

The average graduation rate for this year is the second highest rate for Oregon in recent decades. “Eleven years ago, we were at a 76% graduation rate,” Dirksen said about the Morrow County School District’s graduation rates, “and so this is not a new goal of the district — we’ve been working on the improvement along the way and were able to highlight it this last school year.”

Last year’s graduation number was likely inflated to some degree by testing requirements being relaxed due to the start of the pandemic coinciding with the final months of the school year. This year, challenges with remote learning requirements and shortened school hours were an alarm for school administrators who saw that reduced in-class time could be a detriment to students.

“When we could have in person, that was our first

priority,” said La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza. “We recognized that not everybody participated as well as we would like with Comprehensive Distance Learning; not everybody participated as well with packet-based learning. And so we knew in-person learning was the best mode of operation for us, and so our fight has always been to be in person.”

Morrow County, which saw its highest graduation rate yet, had distance learning for only a short few weeks at the beginning of the school year, according to Dirksen. In comparison, Pendleton and Baker High School, which had remote classrooms for much longer — Pendleton for half the school year, according to East Oregonian reports, and Baker High School up until the beginning of January, according to Lindsey McDowell, public relations and communications coordinator for Baker School District — and their graduations fell by more than 10%.

But correlation does not imply causation, and the data released by the Oregon Department of Education does not include the duration that schools spent in distance learning environments. Nor did schools have control over how long they would be in distance learning beyond measures put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 among students and staff.

Curiously, Baker Web Academy — an online high school founded in 2008, and one of six web academies that reported graduation numbers to the Oregon Department of Education — had a precipitous drop in graduation rates, falling from 75.8% to 69.8%, a drop of 6% from the previous year. Just 164 of the web academy’s 235 seniors graduated in 2021.

Other web academies — including Metro East Web Academy and Clackamas Web Academy — also reported a significant drop in graduation rates, with the online schools’ graduation rates dropping 10.7% and 6.9%, respectively. Sutherlin Valley Online Academy, FLEX Online School and Hillsboro Online Academy also reported decreases in graduation rates.

people who had signed up to donate but then could not come.

He said the American Red Cross has discouraged people who were sick from coming to blood drives long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Strand explained that the Red Cross does not want people coming to blood drives who will get others sick.

The 210 people who participated in this week’s La Grande blood drive included Michael Sell, an Eastern Oregon University art professor. Sell started donating blood about 15 years ago.

“I think that donating blood is a great way to give back and serve the greater good of the community, whether the blood you give stays close to home or travels far. Blood is a renewable resource, and if I can spare some for someone else in need, then of course I’m going to do that,” Sell said.

The cast of donors also included Alan Fong of La Grande, who has donated 86 pints over this lifetime. Fong said he started giving blood while he was a student at Oregon State University because his fraternity participated in blood drives. He has continued since then in an effort to reach out to others, he said.

American Red Cross blood drives in La Grande will be April 5-6, June 14-15, Sept. 13-14 and Nov. 8-9. All will run from noon to 6 p.m. the first day and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. the second day at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1802 Gekeler Lane.

SHELTER

Continued from Page A1

“Lani Jones, the animal control officer, was instrumental in setting up dog programs and protocols,” Lord added. “She was amazing that first year.”

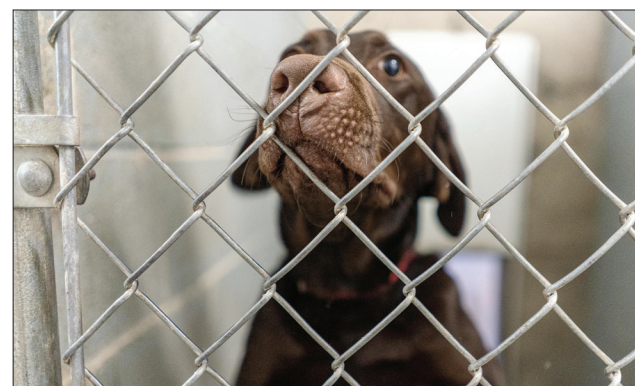
Blue Mountain Humane Association tallied 171 returns to owners in 2021, which Beach credits to Union County Animal Control’s extensive knowledge and connections with animals and their owners across the county.

Local pet store Pet-sense, another blooming connection with the shelter, also plays a key role in adding extra space for cats in a scenario that promotes their adoption. Blue Mountain Humane Association also works closely with other organizations around the state such as the Oregon Humane Society in Portland. In what Hanson described as one of the biggest cat seasons in years, Oregon Humane Society was able to transport 20-30 cats at a time to be held at their state-of-the-art facility. The shelter also works with several rescues in the Boise area.

“We’re slowly building up those partnerships,” Hanson said. “There are shelters that had refused to work with the folks that were running the place before, so we’ve had to kind of build up our reputation again and earn their trust back.”

In 2021, Blue Mountain Humane Association saw 332 animals adopted from the facility. However, that number was nearly tripled by the number of intakes — 901. BMHA has worked diligently on its trap-neuter-return program, which is widely considered the most humane method of controlling feral cat colonies.

“That’s the big hope, really. If we can get more resources going toward fixing feral cats, then we won’t get a box of kittens at our door every day during kitten season,”



Photos by Alex Wittwer/
EO Media Group, File

A chocolate lab (above) presses his nose against his kennel, while a partially blind cat (left) awaits adoption at the Blue Mountain Humane Association in La Grande on Nov. 10, 2021. The shelter came under new management two years ago and has been improving animal care and record keeping, officials said in January 2022.

Hanson said. “It’s just so hard to keep up with those numbers, especially with a small shelter.”

According to the board, Union County has not conducted TNR for years, leading to an influx of feral cats in the area.

“If you do TNR for five years straight, we find that our kitten numbers will drop exponentially,” Lord said. “It makes a huge difference.”

Steady outlook

Volunteers and donations play a crucial role in keeping things afloat at Blue Mountain Humane Association, despite the COVID-19 pandemic providing yet another hurdle. The added help is vital in managing expenses related to medical services for intakes.

“If you take the numbers in what we spend on utilities, payroll, vet bills, medicine, shots and everything else all together across the 900 animals we’ve taken care of this year, it costs us \$220 per animal,” Beach explained.

“The adoption fee is typically under that cost,” Hanson said. “It’s a huge dependence on donations, and we’re still trying to build up those connections again.”

The staff has been

blown away by the regular support of the community in the early stages of new management, whether it be donations big or small. The facility also receives a steady stream of donations in the form of cat and dog food, as well as items for animal care.

This past fall, Blue Mountain Humane Association received a donation of a kitten incubator from Robert Castles and Linda Elegant. Incubators, which can cost several thousand dollars, keep newborn kittens and puppies warm that would otherwise be vulnerable to illness. The donation filled a massive need at the shelter.

After a busy 2021, it is clear that Blue Mountain Humane Association is trending upward under new management. While the shelter has come a long way, its staff is still aiming to continue improving the facility and eyeing potential new projects down the line.

“We’re still at that point where most of our energy is going into keeping the doors open and keeping up with vet expenses,” Hanson said. “There are big dreams, but that’s always on the back burner to just make sure we can keep up with caring for these animals.”

BLOOD

Continued from Page A1

time when blood donations are down nationwide. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started in early 2020, the American Red Cross has experienced a 10% decline in the number of people donating blood, according to www.redcross.org.

“Our supplies are the lowest they have been in 10 years,” said Jake Reines, the account manager for the Donor Recruitment Department of the American Red Cross’ Idaho-Montana-Eastern Oregon Region.

Reines came to this week’s two-day blood drive in La Grande, one of five scheduled here for 2022. He said that La Grande’s rise in blood donations is nothing short of remarkable.

“It is the highest uptick I have seen in this region,” said Reines, who has worked in the Red Cross’ Idaho-Montana-Eastern Oregon region for three years.

Sheldon Strand traces part of the reason for La Grande’s increasing numbers to a decision in 2020 to increase La Grande’s blood drives from one to two days because the community response at one-day drives had been so strong.

Reines credits La Grande’s increase to the generous nature of people in the community and to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the site of almost all of the local blood drives for more than 10 years. He said the fact that the church has allowed



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Kent Coe waits as his blood is drawn at the American Red Cross blood drive in La Grande on Tuesday, Jan. 25, 2022. Coe, who has been donating blood for over 40 years, has donated more than 8 gallons of blood over his lifetime.

the American Red Cross to continue conducting blood drives during the pandemic has been a big plus.

“They have given us the most support of any church,” Reines said.

Reines said one of the reasons donations are down nationwide is that places where many drives are traditionally conducted, including schools and businesses where employees gave blood, have been closed to blood drives because of the pandemic. This has increased the American Red Cross’ reliance on churches as blood drive sites.

Illness drops donations

About 210 people participated in the Jan. 25 and Jan. 26 blood drive in La Grande. The number could have been higher.

“We had many no-shows because people had colds, the flu or COVID-19,” said Sheldon Strand, referring to

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET VACCINATED.

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