

GRADUATION

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Thank you and I hope to see you soon.”

McIlmoil, who is also the high school's head football coach, later encouraged the LHS Class of 2022 to “face the world with a selfless, fearless attitude and remember what your family, community and teachers have taught you and don't ever forget who you are.”

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza, who also spoke during the commencement ceremony, urged the graduates to be lifelong learners.

He said part of this involves letting the people who come into your life teach you something.

“Let them bring value to your life,” he said.

The superintendent also encouraged the graduates to learn from mistakes and to accept and acknowledge them.

“Try not to repeat them and move on,” he said.

He added that sometimes the most significant



Members of the La Grande High School Class of 2022 attend their commencement ceremony on Saturday, June 4, 2022.

Dick Mason/The Observer

growth experience comes from what is learned after making a mistake.

Mendoza also encouraged the graduates to strive to stay positive and

to have gratitude.

“We have many blessings, if we look for them,” he said.

The LHS Class of 2022 was hit hard by the

COVID-19 pandemic, one that forced students to miss activities and receive all instruction online for many months.

Danelle Lindsey, a La

Grande School Board member, praised the graduates for persevering through the trials posed by COVID-19. She said this revealed the students' strength.

“Never before have we asked students to face such amazing obstacles: a pandemic, masking and constantly changing rules and regulations,” she said. “And you faced it and are standing here today as graduates.”

The school board member encouraged the students to let the strength they gained from dealing with challenges help them take on future challenges.

“The world is going to throw more curveballs your way. Let your strength, determination and integrity guide you through life with the attitude of ‘I survived a pandemic, I've got this,’” she said.

Carter Perry, one of the school's five valedictorians, along with Derek Begin, Braden Carson, Cole Jorgensen and Isabelle Kump, said what members of his class accomplished is remarkable in light of the pandemic.

“Our accomplishments have been astounding,” he said, “even during and after a shutdown unlike any in the past 100 years.”

VETERANS

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said, but the VA is competing with employers who can offer better pay and incentives. And coaxing people back to work after learning to work remotely due to the pandemic is another challenge.

Catching up on travel reimbursements, he said, also is about staffing and it could come down to contracting that out.

“Obviously that will be at higher cost to do that, but we are committed to getting those claims down,” he said.

Recruiting registered nurses “is challenging across the board,” Kelter said, and while the VA has made hiring incentives, applicants might pass because they can get on somewhere else faster. The VA also has cut down its on-boarding process, but the VA still has the obligation to ensure someone treating vets is safe.

Kelter said as a veteran himself and with a son and

daughter in the military now, he is keenly interested in access to veteran care.

Discussion on AIR Commission recommendations

Boyd and Kelter also addressed concerns on the Asset and Infrastructure Review — AIR — Commission to modernize and realign the VA health care system.

Boyd said at this point, changes to Walla Walla and other places are just recommendations, and implementation will take years. Between now and then, she said, there are going to be numerous steps for more input.

“It's going to take all of us to come to a good implementation plan,” she said.

Kelter said the question comes down to how to take the recommendations of the AIR Commission and make sure they have positive results, including balancing the use of technology and in-person care.

He noted this process does not take the place of

smart decisions in the field, and when the recommendations ultimately come down, the VA is looking at some matters that will affect Eastern Oregon veterans.

The VA is looking at more telehealth care in Boardman and Enterprise, for example, and Kelter said he wants to see a provider at those locations more often as well as a nurse.

“The staffing model that we're pursuing there I think will help in those areas in particular,” he said, adding the VA also is examining how it can best staff the La Grande clinic to meet veterans' needs.

The AIR Commission is recommending to increase services in the Tri-Cities because the need is there, he said, but it remains to be seen what that means for Walla Walla.

He stressed the AIR Commission is about providing more and better care to veterans, not about cutting costs.

And he said shifting Walla Walla's rehabilita-

tion treatment to Spokane is what is on the plate, but not other services.

Wyden at the end said details will be forthcoming on the next two meetings, but his point in all this is making the government go the extra mile for veterans rather than making veterans go extra miles for their care.

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BUDGET

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reflects a higher than anticipated boost in what the state will be paying school districts per student in 2022-23. Mendoza said it had been anticipated the state would be paying school districts \$8,700 per student but instead districts will be receiving \$9,400 per student.

Mendoza said the school district has a significant amount of COVID-19 relief funds for the next two school years, but the district is restricted in what it can spend the relief funds on. After two years the school district will have little if any COVID-19 funding remaining to buffer its enrollment decline, he said, meaning the chance of layoffs starting in the 2024-25 school year will be much greater if enrollment does not rise significantly.

“Our reality is we will hit a significant fiscal cliff if our enrollment does not improve and if our State School Fund formula is not adequate,” Mendoza said in the school district's budget document.

The State School Fund formula refers to the amount of money school districts receive per student.

The school district's enrollment has been declining since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Oregon in March 2020. Mendoza said the school district is down 244 students since the start of the pandemic.

The school district now has 2,120 students, down from the 2,364 it had in October 2019. Enrollment has been progressively worsening.

The school district had 2,230 students in October 2020 and 2,179 students in October 2021, according to the La Grande School District's 2022-23 proposed budget document.

Mendoza had said he hoped to get about 80 of the students lost back this school year, but as the numbers indicate, the district instead has lost 59 students.

The superintendent said enrollment is down in part due to state COVID-19 requirements that polarized parents and the school district, resulting in some parents deciding not to send their children to La Grande School District schools based on masking and vaccination issues and what environment they want their children to be in.

Issues like this have led more families to home-

schooling, enrolling their children in online charter schools or moving their children into schools outside of the La Grande School District's boundaries.

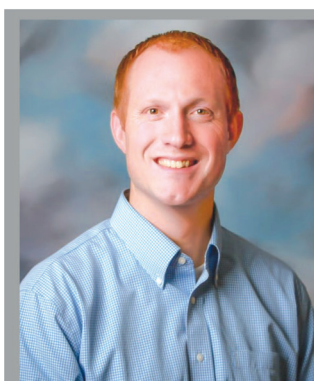
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