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Opinion

Editor & Publisher
Joe Beach
Managing Editor
Carl Sampson
opinions@capitalpress.com | CapitalPress.com/opinion

Our View

Don't throw out the 'essential skills'

The Oregon Legislature has suspended through 2024 the requirement that students show proficiency in reading, writing and math — the aptly named “essential skills” — as a requirement for getting a high school diploma.

Is the ability to apply those skills no longer necessary in everyday life? If so, we didn't get the memo.

Essential skills proficiency was added as a requirement for graduation a decade ago.

Teaching kids to read and write and do basic math was the whole point of public education when it came into existence. The public school curriculum has become more complicated over the years, but has always been filled with courses where students presumably learned and used those skills.

But, a lot of students were graduating without the ability to apply them in real-life situations. Employers weren't the only ones to take notice, and the decision was made to mandate proficiency as a requirement for a diploma.



It does not seem too high of an expectation after 12 years of schooling.

School districts had various options to test that proficiency. But critics of the requirement have called those tests into question, alleging that they are unfair to non-native English speakers and racial minorities.

Senate Bill 744 calls a halt to the testing and the proficiency requirement and orders the Oregon Department of Education to evaluate graduation standards.

“The testing that we've been doing in the past doesn't tell us what we want to know,” Sen. Lew Frederick,

D-Portland, told KATU. “We have been relying on tests that have been, frankly, very flawed and relying too much on them so that we aren't really helping the students or the teachers or the community.”

We see nothing wrong with evaluating and upgrading graduation requirements. We are less enthusiastic about, but not completely against, alternative evaluation methods for determining proficiency.

But we agree with Republicans in the legislature who say the state should not suspend the current standard while this evaluation takes place.

“The approach for Senate Bill 744 is to, in fact, lower our expectations for our kids,” said Oregon House Minority Leader Christine Drazan. “This is the wrong time to do that, when we have had this year of social isolation and lost learning. It's the wrong thing to do in this moment.”

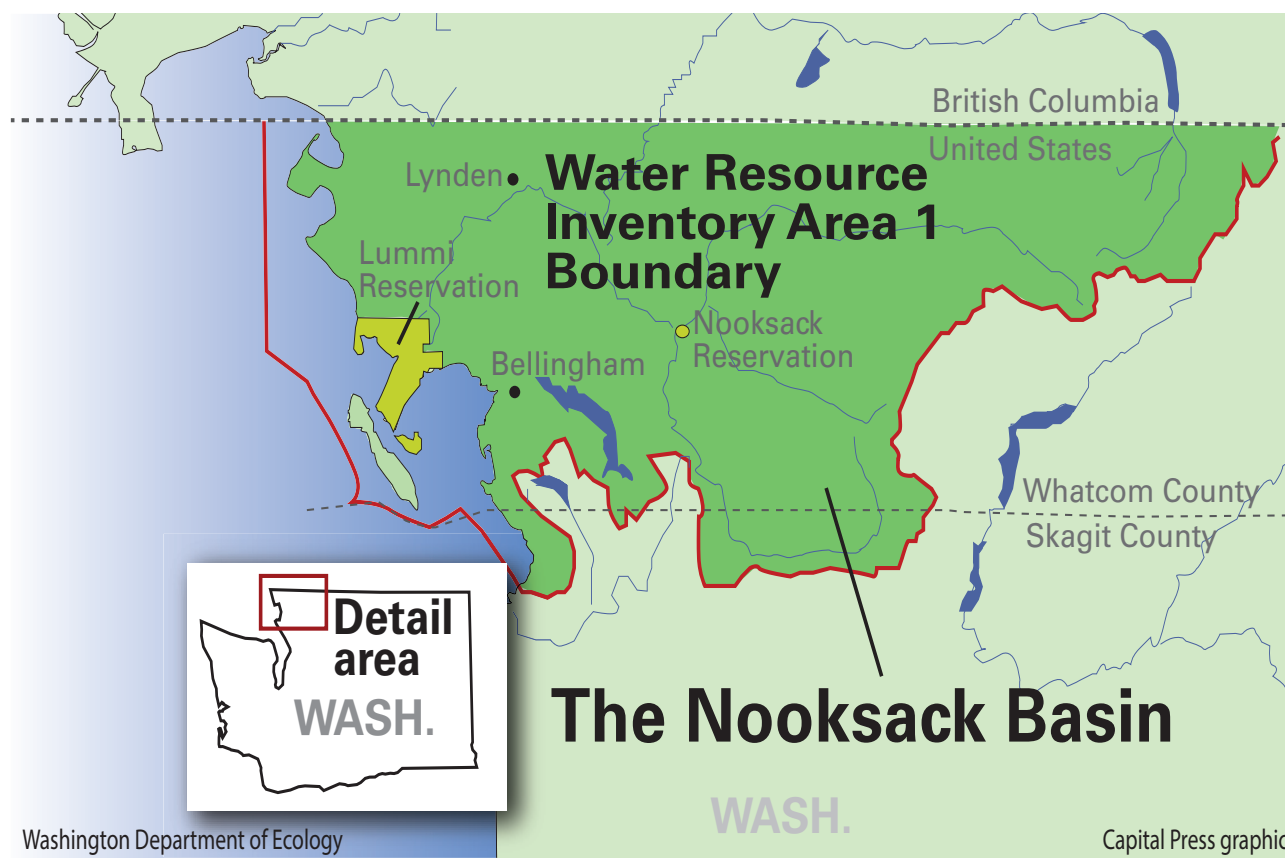
Our biggest fear is that the real goal of SB 744 is to find more ways to declare students proficient without actually teaching more students to be proficient.

Putting your boots in the oven won't make them biscuits, and declaring a student proficient through some convoluted evaluation won't make that so either.

The goal should be for every student, regardless of race or ethnicity, to be proficient in the essential skills, not to artificially increase the graduation rates.

To demand less turns an Oregon high school diploma into a participation trophy. That would truly be a disservice to the students and to the community.

Our View



Pain but uncertain gain in adjudication

The adjudication of a river basin's water rights is the legal equivalent of kidney stones. Only after the requisite amount of suffering can the water flow again.

Farmers and others in Whatcom County, Wash., will soon have that experience, and few of them are looking forward to it.

The Washington Department of Ecology will get the festivities underway in 2023 by filing a lawsuit in which water users will be required to substantiate their claims to water in the Nooksack River Basin.

The Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe asked the department for the adjudication to sort out who has rights to surface and ground water in the basin. About 40,000 acres of farmland are irrigated in the county, which is tucked in the north-west corner of the state.

Anyone with a claim to water will have to justify it before a judge.

This will take a while. A simpler adjudication in the Yakima River Basin took more than 40 years. In Whatcom County, 5,400 people have water rights in the Nooksack Basin, and as many as 14,000 have wells. The judge will consider both because the aquifer and the river are connected.

Further complicating the picture are the tribes' treaty rights, Ecology's requirement for minimum stream flows for fish and unkept promises the department made to farmers in years past. Based on a past court decision, the tribes figure they might be entitled to half of all the water.

The adjudication will certainly be a boon to many professions. Farmers are hiring lawyers,

hydrologists and others to help them protect or substantiate water rights, some of which date back a century or more.

The stakes are high. Whatcom County farmers produced \$372.8 million in goods, according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture. Factor in agriculture's overall impact and the adjudication could make or break the county's economic back. No water means no farms.

The county is unique in one regard. It gets more than 40 inches of rain a year yet still doesn't have enough water. That's because most of the rain falls in the winter. Most of the need for water — for irrigation, watering livestock, fish passage and other purposes — is in the summer, when it is generally much drier.

Farmers in the region see a lack of flexibility on the part of the state's water laws as another problem. The “use it or lose it” law means that no matter how much they need during any given year they must use their entire water right or possibly lose access to it. Legislators would do well to take a look at such outdated and counter-productive laws.

Farmers in the region well know the need for adequate stream flows. In the past, they have even pumped well water into streams during the dry late summer to boost the flow and aid fish returning to spawn. One wonders whether such good deeds will be recognized in the adjudication.

Above all else, the judge will likely discover that sorting out water rights is only a piece of the puzzle of how to provide adequate water supplies to the many competing interests in the Nooksack Basin.

Prescribed fires help take heat off

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:

GUEST VIEW
Sen. Ron Wyden



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.