

Diploma Decline

Low grad rates in 4J continue to puzzle BY KEVIN SULLIVAN

National high school graduation rates are on the rise: A recent report from the U.S. Department of Education found that high school graduation rates in 2012 marked an unprecedented high of 80 percent. However, last year in Eugene, roughly only 64 percent of high school students graduated in four years in the 4J School District.

Although 4J saw a 79 percent on-time graduation rate in 2008, its grad rates have since fallen, and while the Bethel School District saw a 69.7 percent grad rate in 2013, that number reflects a 12 percentage point increase from 2011. Both percentages are below or slightly above the Oregon average of 69 percent.

Many of those in the education community have ideas as to why this is — from faulty data to booming class sizes — but the exact reasons are still hazy.

Outgoing 4J Superintendent Sheldon Berman and 4J Communications Director Kerry Delf say there are a couple artificial factors that produced the low graduation rate. In an email Delf sent to *EW*, she says that 6.4 percent of the students who were eligible to graduate last year chose instead to enroll in 4J ACTS — a fifth year program based out of LCC that is designed to give students a head start to college.

The other factor is that 20 students who graduated last year (1.4 percent) were not reported correctly to the Oregon Department of Education.

Berman says that class sizes and budget cuts also contribute to low graduation rates, but for him the biggest factor is scheduling. “When I got here, I realized that not all students in high school had a full schedule,” he says.

Three years ago when Berman came to 4J, the number of high school students with full schedules totaled about 32 percent. To combat this, the 4J district has implemented a plan that gave 96 percent of freshmen full schedules. Because of these efforts, Berman says he believes graduation rates will increase as students with



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full schedules come closer to graduation.

“I know that that’s the hope, but I’m not sure that fully scheduling freshmen is going to improve the graduation rate,” says Tad Shannon, president of the Eugene Education Association. Shannon says it’s possible that students who are more “at-risk” could be more likely to drop out if they are forced to take a full course load.

Shannon goes on to say that there isn’t enough information to know whether full schedules would hurt or help students.

Full course loads are not 4J’s only strategy. The school district has implemented trainings for both students and staff to combat lack of counseling services due to budget cuts.

UO professor and former researcher in the U.S. Department of Education Edward Kameenui says that a variety of factors contribute to low graduation rates. “You can have one-to-one instruction and still not get the gains you want if other stuff isn’t in place,” Kameenui says. He notes that, among other factors, early reading achievements can be critical for later graduating high school on time.

Colt Gill, superintendent of Bethel School District, says the district has six areas that they attribute to the districts’ rise in grad rates. One of them happens to be a reading program for students in kindergarten through third grade that was developed 13 years ago by Kameenui and other researchers. The students who are now graduating were some of the first to go through the reading program, and that could be part of the reason for the increase, Gill says.

Another factor Gill attributes to Bethel’s increase in grad rates is proficiency-based instruction. Between grades six and 12, the grading system makes sure that students have the skills necessary to proceed to the next level, not relying on attendance or extra credit. “We don’t say, ‘Oh, you didn’t pass.’ We say, ‘Well, we need to get back to work,’” he says.

The final factor Gill mentions is Bethel’s system for showing whether students are on track to graduate. They are one of five districts in the state that implemented an “early warning system” or, as Bethel calls it, the “on track to success system.” This system sends home report cards once or twice a year that describe attendance, behavior and how parents and teachers can work together to maintain or improve their students’ experience.

Despite the respective efforts of both districts, school officials agree there is room for improvement.

Class sizes are “growing in such a way that it’s not even reasonable,” Gill says. Class-size growth and lethal budget cuts were among the common complaints from both superintendents and Shannon.

“It would be illogical to assume that achievement in graduation ... would improve as we systematically disinvest in public education,” Shannon says.

Although Oregon has the second lowest (third lowest, if you count Washington, D.C.) graduation rates in the nation, there are nearby schools that boast exceptionally high graduation rates. For example, Sherwood High School, with a class of 360, saw a graduation rate of 93 percent for the class of 2013, while South Eugene and Sheldon, with a class size of 368 and 354, respectively, had graduation rates of 76 and 77 percent. ■



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