

BETHEL SUPERINTENDENT TAPPED FOR STATE EDUCATION INNOVATION

Earlier this year, Gov. Kate Brown sat down with Bethel School District Superintendent Colt Gill and made him an offer he couldn't refuse: She asked him to join the effort to raise Oregon's flagging graduation rate — one of the lowest in the country at 74 percent — by becoming Oregon's first education innovation officer.

After 10 years as superintendent of Bethel, Gill will leave that job behind for this newly created position at the state level and "find out what can help turn our graduation situation in Oregon around," he says.

In addition to his role as superintendent, Gill has played a vital role in Eugene's education community, from speaking on panels about state funding to serving on a wide range of committees and boards that help direct the path of education in Oregon, including serving on the board of United Way of Lane County and on the state Quality Education Commission.

With so many issues plaguing Oregon education, why was graduation selected as the first task for the education innovation officer to tackle?

The number of high school students graduating on time is so low, Gill says, that Oregon is "near crisis state." High school graduation is important not only for students, but for the future of Oregon, Gill explains, because the economic viability of the state depends on the success of the next generation. Boosting graduation rates means fixing problems

throughout the entire system, starting with pre-kindergarten.

"I think the graduation issue is definitely job one," he says.

In conversation, Gill is soft-spoken and knowledgeable, careful to break down complicated matters like school funding in a comprehensible way. When talking about Bethel's accomplishments, he never refers to himself, instead using "we" to include the entire district.

"He is one of the most genuine people I have ever met," says Bethel Deputy Superintendent Chris Parra. "He cares deeply about students and their achievements, and he cares about the community and the staff. He's just really quite an amazing leader."

Parra, who has worked with Gill for six years, says that during Gill's time in Bethel, the district has benefited from the passage of a 2012 school bond that allowed Bethel to build two new elementary schools and add a high-tech science wing to Willamette High School.

During Gill's tenure, graduation rates at Bethel have steadily increased, and Bethel's rate of 74.45 percent is slightly higher than Eugene 4J's 74.23 percent and Springfield's 65.7 percent. Bethel saw a rise in underserved student graduation rates as well, helping to narrow achievement gaps for students of color.

While this success played a role in Gov. Brown's recruitment of Gill — "Colt's experience in the classroom, in the community and as an administrator give him the perspective

and vision to help us improve our dismal graduation rate," she said in a prepared statement — he is careful to point out that what works in Bethel may not work on a state level, and part of his new job is to look not only at Oregon but outside the state for research-backed methods for raising on-time graduation rates.

"If Oregon's graduation rates are among the bottom five states out of 50, this may not be the best place to look at how to improve," Gill notes. He says much of his work will be collaborative as he meets with groups in the state and beyond.

Parra, who is stepping in for Gill as interim superintendent of Bethel, says the past few weeks have been "pretty wild and crazy" as she and Gill have coordinated the passing of the baton.

Parra "knows our mission inside and out, and she will be a source of stability for the staff as we go through this change," Gill says. "I don't think you'll see the dramatic changes that happen when you have a new superintendent and the culture completely shifts. I have a lot of confidence in her skills."

Parra says she plans to "continue with the direction that we are already on," focusing on graduation rates and making sure students have equitable access to education. "I don't have grand-scale changes in mind because I think we are on the right path to increase student achievement," she says.

As for Gill, he will continue to live in Eugene and commute to Salem, where he starts work June 1.

"My hope is that we do get graduation rates turned around, and then this innovation officer position can find other ways to innovate," Gill says with a smile. "Either that, or we decide it's not needed anymore. To say that we're back at the top and we're stable — that would be fabulous, too." ■

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