

OPINION

editor@dailyastorian.com



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OUR VIEW

Students yearn for greater respect, involvement

The most sobering aspect of a new survey of Oregon high school students is how much their views align with those of their elders.

Each generation wishes for future generations to be better off. Yet Oregon's high school population feels the same divides and discontents as the rest of the country.

There is a divide between those high schoolers who are satisfied with their lot in life and those who are not. There is a yearning for greater respect and for greater involvement in the governmental decisions that affect their lives. There is widespread concern about access to mental health care.

These issues are revealed in the newly released "State of Our Schools: Examining Oregon's High Schools Through Students' Eyes," which might be the first statewide student survey conducted by Oregon students themselves. More than 2,200 high schoolers participated in an online survey or focus groups.

Oregon Student Voice, which is open to students in sixth through 12th grades, conducted the study with the assistance of two respected partners — the Chalkboard Project and DHM Research. Participation was voluntary, so the statistics might not carry the same weight as randomized surveys. But the conclusions remain relevant, especially because they were written by students.

High schoolers are insightful. They know who's a good teacher and who's not. They recognize whether discipline is administered fairly, equitably and consistently. They care whether the school administration — all the way up to the school board — heeds their ideas.

As a society, we know that students who feel valued and engaged are more likely to carry those attitudes into civic life as adults. In con-



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Students favor teachers who welcome feedback and adapt their teaching accordingly.

MORE INFORMATION

Oregon Student Voice: www.oregonstudentvoice.org

"State of Our Schools" Report: tinyurl.com/OR-Student-Voices

trast, the Oregon Student Voice report states: "Exclusionary cliques, social tensions and bullying are all present within schools. Students assert that those who do not fit into the typical high school student mold do not receive the respect, stability and support needed to succeed in their school. Students believe that high schools are oriented towards helping those already on a path to success, leaving behind everyone else."

Among the research findings:

- Most students enjoy high school, but 32 percent cite a lack of trust and mutual respect in their schools.

- 40 percent consider access to mental health resources to be the most important issue facing K-12 policy-makers. The No. 2 issue, identified by 22 percent, is career and technical education.

- 77 percent of students feel engaged in class. Among those who do not have post-high school plans — college, trade school or the military — that figure drops to 49 percent.

- 76 percent have a teacher or other school staff member whom they trust as a mentor. Again, that figure drops significantly among students who do not

plan to attend college.

- 81 percent say their teachers are good, but only 51 percent think the content of required courses is relevant to their futures.

- Students favor teachers who welcome feedback and adapt their teaching accordingly. The report states: "Students want to learn in interactive, collaborative and hands-on environments. Students are critical of rote memorization and inflexible approaches that favor higher-achieving students while leaving others behind."

The research contains many positives about students' views of their education. But their concerns should generate a statewide call to action. Otherwise, the divides that roil our state and nation will continue to manifest themselves.

GUEST COLUMN

Astoria needs to get to the roots of homelessness

By giving Astoria's homeless food and shelter, concerned Astorians are taking care of their immediate needs. Just like my grandparents' generation did. And just like my great-grandparents' generation did before them.

Doing the same thing over-and-over for a hundred years, however, hasn't ended homelessness. But I suspect all Astorians would like to see it ended.



DON HASKELL

The problem is that Astoria is trying to manage the city's homeless crisis, a short-range approach. What Astoria needs is action based on long-range decision-making.

Hardly anybody in Astoria disagrees the homeless need food, shelter, warm clothing and a modicum of respect. Unfortunately, the effort stops when Astorians provide those things. The Helping Hands organization's takeover of the old boarding house in Uniontown offers Astoria a glimmer of hope to change that.

Astorians should consider long-range action that go to the root of the problem. But that's harder. Some will say it's impossible. To end homelessness might take years, causing others to say it'll take too long in a lifetime to bother.

One thing is clear. Doing what's needed to end problems the homeless create, won't be as self-satisfying as the warm feeling everybody gets when personally helping others. That's what managing the problem does. And that aspect of human nature makes it difficult to think and act long range about the subject.

The homeless have been part of Astoria's community for decades. No doubt going back even a century or two. And I suspect we have more homeless people living in tents somewhere in Clatsop County, or in cars, than everybody realizes.

The reasons people become homeless aren't hard to figure out. Just Google "causes of homelessness" and you'll get many responses.

Astoria's problems with the homeless community were fairly minor until recently. Since the problems are now in the spotlight, young people may think homelessness is something



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

The Astoria Warming Center shelters the homeless on cold winter nights.

new. After all, they haven't experienced it before.

In the late 1930s back in Ohio, the movie my friends and I went to on Saturday afternoon usually had a bad-smelling bearded man on the sidewalk. He begged for pennies (movies cost 5 cents then). And he slept in the nearby park. It was a mystery where he went in the winter.

I don't remember seeing any homeless people in the early 1940s when everybody was on a wartime footing. Nor do I remember my parents ever bringing up the subject during the war.

From my grade school and high school days in the '30s and '40s to my old age in 2018, however, I've seen the homeless problem go from fairly minor to really big-time major in every city in the United States — including Astoria.

Astorians lament because Astoria needs more affordable housing, which is the chief tangible thing the homeless lack. After all, homelessness is defined by the lack of housing. But housing in Astoria brings up Astoria's coastal location.

We're situated on a peninsula with very limited hilly land to build on. And we're

populated with well-intentioned folks trying to preserve what Astoria used to be, rather than deal with what Astoria has become.

Astoria's resistance to change in the city's building restrictions is a huge roadblock to permanently resolve a large part of Astoria's homeless problem.

If Astorians decide they really want more affordable housing in town, we realistically need to allow apartment builders to build up. Lift the building height and other restrictions in some areas of the city. And pay compensation if blocking views lowers a homeowner's property value.

There's no other way Astorians can allow affordable housing to be built in town for an ever-increasing number of Astorians who don't have a place to call home.

The only other alternative is for Astorians to forget altogether about building more housing in town. Rely on neighboring — and flat — Warrenton to do so. And strengthen bus service to Astoria, instead.

The need for more affordable housing is obvious and essential. But it isn't enough to end homelessness. Services in the areas of physical and behavioral health, employment

education, and other social services are just as important. To some homeless folks, they're even more important than housing.

After housing, the next most important need screams out it's so obvious. And that's the help needed with the homeless folks' mental and drug problems.

People who defecate in public areas when they could walk a block or two to use community-furnished toilets aren't mentally stable. Either that or they're high on alcohol or drugs. And public defecation is only one aspect of the mental disabilities and drug reactions demonstrated every night and day in Astoria.

Even more housing and mental health care alone won't end homelessness. Unless Astorians bring the homeless back into mainstream society, those who have only an apartment key eventually will get lonely and depressed. And go back out on the street where the people they know are living.

Over the years, the Oregon Legislature has closed most of the state's mental facilities. And recently Gov. Kate Brown proposed closing even more. What dumb decisions by short-sighted politicians!

With respect to more social services, the taxpayer must be persuaded their taxes are necessary and will be well-spent. That's really hard to do when Oregon's taxes already are among the highest in the nation.

Oregon's money priorities seem to have plunged into choices between extraordinary pension benefits for public employees and what's left for everything else. That's a truly sad situation for state government to be in.

Astoria is one of the very few rural communities in Oregon that consistently supports one-party rule in Salem. Astorians need to yell and scream loud enough to make the governor and Legislature restore needed assistance to those with mental and drug problems. If necessary, threaten the politicians to withhold their always-taken-for-granted support. Then follow up and do it.

History clearly tells us just managing homelessness won't end it. Astorians should start thinking long range. Otherwise an ever-increasing homeless population will always be a permanent part of our community.

Don Haskell is a retired attorney and former Clatsop County commissioner who lives in Astoria.