

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## OUR VIEW

# Don't throw out '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 nonnative 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



Seaside High School graduates received their diplomas at the Turnaround in June.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

evaluate graduation standards.

“The testing that we've been doing in the past doesn't tell us what we want to know,” state 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 House Minority Leader Christine Drazan, R-Canby. “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.

## GUEST COLUMN

# Project brings new hope for salmon

The Coquille and two tributaries, Beaver Creek and China Camp Creek, cross a huge flood plain or delta about 20 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean behind Coos Bay. To the common eye, it looks like a green pasture with grazing cows. In actuality, here is the largest salmon restoration project in all of Oregon and, possibly, along the entire West Coast.

And one of the great successes. Hopefully, some of these lessons and inspirations might be shared on the Columbia River and Willapa Bay.

The China Camp Creek Project and Winter Lake restoration is the dream-child of Fred Messerle, farmer, ex-county commissioner and visionary. But dreams are rarely completed without effort, and generally, not without a belly-full of anxiety.

Messerle knows it all. He fought for every inch of this refuge and field with water arteries — canals and sloughs and ditches — that encompasses 1,700 acres. That's a big chunk of wetland. Indeed, a bigger-than-life dream.

Sometimes called “Winter Lake,” the landscape leaps and sweeps into soft lavender foothills and ignites our imagination. Messerle states that his family and co-conspirators have “been at this for quite a while.” In these parts, his family — farmers, mostly — harken from the mid-19th century. “Nature had it down,” admits Messerle, “but for 110 years, we screwed it up.”

Messerle relocates his John Deer hat over his brow and then further defines the problem. “How,” he says, “do we now design a system that duplicates nature?”

Salmon were once king in these coastal rivers. But recent generations haven't fared so well.

The China Camp Creek Project aims to change some of that. And if early success is any indication, Messerle and friends are off to a good start. The beauty of the project is this: the field serves three uses, and each is critical to the success of this young project and of major benefit to the long-term revitalization of the Pacific salmon.



The China Camp Creek Project is intended to improve salmon habitat.

The World

As I mentioned, cattle graze here. And salmon smolts grow into fingerlings that are two times the average length and weight of their upriver brethren. And the waterfowl pour in. Sixty-percent of the ducks and geese that travel twice a year up and down the Oregon Coast settle onto these fields — often as layovers — and feed on the rich green grass. The salmon smolts are content as well, devouring proteins from decomposed salmon carcasses, tiny shrimp and fish, as well as insects that settle into these backwaters.

Hard-fought compromise seems to please most of the partners in the Beaver Slough Drainage District, and that comradeship pleases the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and many other patrons of this restoration. “Win-win when we can work together,” repeats Messerle, chasing that mantra like a trout surfacing for a fly. Huge tide gates control the flood of

water, the bulk coming from the Coquille but supplemented in the winter by heavy rainfall. In the rainy season, when freshets shape the landscape, the gates are closed, and water floods the field. High water protects the salmon smolts just as it enhances the rich green grasses that the waterfowl so love. In the spring, after the salmon leave, the cattle are released back onto the fields, where they will fatten for months until they are once again rounded up and shipped to larger feeding lots in Yakima, Hermiston and Moses Lake.

Everybody is happy. And if there was a battle over the initial concept — the flooding of all this land — most of the complaints have bottomed out. But as anyone knows, change never comes easily and it can certainly whiplash as suddenly as a winter freshet. Dreamers often dance on the edge.

“Initially, people were worried about

breeding mosquitoes. They were worried about flooding. They had considerations about government intervention. Hell, some thought they were facing Armageddon. None of that came to be. And now we have this,” Messerle said as he sweeps his strong arms in a great circle and grins contentedly.

Messerle eyes the electrical gates. Checks the control panels while commenting on the condition of the Northwest salmon populations. “It's sad,” he says. “Doggone sad. What were unimaginable runs of salmon have been diminished year after year.”

“The hope,” he says, his leather-hard face reflecting the yellow midday sun, “is for more of this.” And as he talks, his farmer's muscular arm lifts and points over his recent creation, proudly, like an artist reflecting on a masterpiece.

David Campiche is an avid chef and potter in Seaview, Washington.