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HERMISTON/3A



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EAST OREGONIAN

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Governor tours Pendleton Early Learning Center



Gov. Kate Brown talks with students in a kindergarten class while on a tour Wednesday at the Pendleton Early Learning Center. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Investing in the future

Brown signs bill to encourage investment in solar power

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Kate Brown is no stranger to Pendleton, having traveled to the city twice since becoming governor in February 2015.

Brown marked her third visit by touring the Pendleton Early Learning Center Wednesday with officials from the school district.

Superintendent Jon Peterson got a chance to show off the center, a “one-stop shop” for early education with a centralized preschool, kindergarten, health center and other amenities.

The center was made possible by a \$57 million bond passed in 2013 that allowed the district to increase its focus on early childhood and career technical education, in addition to facility upgrades.

The early childhood focus is starting to pay dividends.

The school district recently released data that shows steady growth in Pendleton kindergarten students’ math and English comprehension.

According to an assessment administered in early October, kindergartners can identify 22.1 letters in a minute, a nearly three-letter improvement from two years prior and several letters higher than the state’s 18.5 average.

Pendleton students also surpassed state averages in English letter sounds, math and interpersonal skills assessments.

Yet there is still a long way to go. An assessment administered the first week of school



Gov. Kate Brown signs House Bill 4037 on Wednesday at the Pendleton Early Learning Center. House Bill 4037 creates new incentives for investment in solar power. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

showed that although a majority of students start kindergarten knowing some letters and numbers, there are plenty of students that have no knowledge of the building blocks of English and math. For instance, 40 percent of students were unable to identify a single letter sound.

In addition to holding full-day kindergarten for the first time, Matt Yoshioka, district curriculum, instruction and assessment coordinator,

said kindergarten teachers integrate these concepts into stories and songs to get children up to speed.

Furthermore, the district has ramped up its preschool efforts, housing the Umatilla-Morrow Head Start’s Pendleton location and hiring a full-time preschool teacher of their

See BROWN/8A

Umatilla Co. sued by former employees

Alleges retaliation, wrongful termination

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Three former employees are suing Umatilla County and alleging misuse of funds, retaliation, discrimination, wrongful termination and more.

Martha Laura Aviles-Valdez and her husband Juan Valdez were drug and alcohol counselors in the county’s human services department. Carolyn Mason was the department director. The county suspended all three in April 2015 during an internal investigation, then fired them two months later.

County officials have never specified what led to the investigation or firings. But the 25-page suit filed Feb. 23 by attorney Shemia Fagan in U.S. District Court, Portland, claims the plaintiffs discovered “unlawful activity and wasted public funds” and “earned the ire” of the county after blowing the whistle. The county then “seized on a simple clerical error to create a faux-scandal, terminate the whistleblowers and permanently tarnish their reputations.”

Per the lawsuit, in April 2014 Mason helped the county obtain a state grant to fund a bilingual specialist for the Community Access to Resource Effectiveness program. But Commissioner George Murdock and the Hermiston School District struck a deal for the district to pay the county for the specialist to work in Hermiston schools to help Spanish-speaking families. A replacement bilingual specialist left the county job after a month, and the county never hired another. That violated the terms of the grant.

When Mason complained to Murdock, she claims he told her to report to the state that the specialist in the Hermiston schools was fulfilling the county role and directed her to “fraudulently report” the grant was funding the position. She refused. The suit claims Murdock then made a false report about how the grant money was used.

Murdock then began mocking Mason about her age, the lawsuit further asserts.

Umatilla County in April 2015 also contracted with the Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. to administer new Medicaid/Oregon Health Plan funding. GOBHI, however, did not provide any training on the new reimbursement

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On behalf of militants

Out-of-state politicians participated in refuge takeover

By JOHN SEPULVADO
Oregon Public Broadcasting

On a cold January morning, a posse led by a former Army company commander named Matt Shea rolled into the Harney County Courthouse and wanted to speak to the sheriff.

But this wasn’t a group of militants, or outlaws. They were state lawmakers from four western states, including Oregon. Most of them were members of a group called the Coalition of Western States, or COWS.

They were hoping to talk directly with Sheriff David Ward and convince him to support the armed militants at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Instead, COWS members would meet

that day with a Harney County deputy and a sheriff from another county, an FBI agent and other local officials.

The out-of-town visitors presented themselves as wanting to help understand and, if possible, end the armed occupation at the refuge.

“I’m just looking at peaceful resolve,” said Nevada Assemblywoman Michele Fiore, a COWS member who was patched into the meeting by phone.

“That’s our intent,” agreed Shea, a state representative from Washington.

“If there’s any opportunity to save life

See REFUGE/8A



Harney County Sheriff Dave Ward meets with Ammon Bundy at a remote location outside the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge on Jan. 7. AP file photo



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