

Achievement gap for American Indian students persists in Pendleton, statewide

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

When presenting awards to exemplary American Indian students at a school board meeting Monday at Wildhorse Resort & Casino, many Pendleton School District principals highlighted the honoree's perfect or near-perfect attendance.

After the applause ended and the families filed out, Matt Yoshioka, the district's curriculum, instruction and assessment coordinator, said a lack of attendance plays a large part in the persistent performance gap between Native American students and their peers.

"The achievement gap is real," he said. "It's alive and well."

The data Yoshioka compiled show only a slight gap during kindergarten assessments that measure English letter names and sounds, math and interpersonal skills. But that gap grew into double digit territory when students took the Smarter Balanced assessment in grades 3-8 and 11.

Yet Yoshioka said some of the statistics weren't truly representative. Enrolled tribal members that identified as more than one race were sometimes considered



EO file photo

Students watch as Kimberly Minthorn, Native American education coordinator for the CTUIR, lashes poles together while teaching how to put up a teepee in May at Pendleton High School. The Pendleton School District is working to increase attendance to help close the achievement gap for American Indian students.

"multi-racial" instead of Native American and the attendance figures (93.5 percent attendance for all students versus 92.2 percent for American Indian students in 2016) didn't properly reflect some of the chronic absenteeism issues. He said that might be better measured by looking at the number of students who miss more than 10 percent of

their school days.

Yoshioka said attendance issues begin around kindergarten, which makes it difficult for children to meet the benchmarks later in school.

"(People) have a notion, a belief, that kindergarten doesn't really matter," he said.

Lloyd Commander, the Confed-

erated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation youth services and recreation program manager, said the Pendleton School District had the best tribal relationship of any school district in Oregon, but said the persistent achievement gap was "shameful."

"The foundation keeps shifting," he said, referring to the changes the state has made to its assessment system in recent years. "But in each case, there's been a gap."

Commander added that the CTUIR has done its part to help tribal youth, offering a four-week summer school session and after-school tutoring. He said the school district needed to shoulder more of the burden.

Gary George, school board member and Wildhorse CEO, asked what the school district should do differently.

Commander said the school district could take measures like setting achievement goals for American Indian students and tracking their improvement.

One measure the school district is already undertaking is using a state grant to improve attendance at Washington Elementary School, which has the district's highest American Indian population.

The district hired Brent Spencer, a former employee in the tribal education department, to track American Indian student attendance and create initiatives to improve it.

Since school started in September, Spencer said he has built relationships with students during the breakfast and lunch periods, made calls home when children miss school and introduced incentives like family nights and Wildhorse cineplex movie tickets to get families more involved in attendance.

Spencer said tribal parents' negative experiences at school can sometimes transfer to their children. So in a move toward cultural inclusiveness, the Washington school spirit shirts also include the Umatilla word for their wildcat mascot, with the hope to include more Umatilla words within the school.

Although Spencer's position is only funded through the June, he estimated the program would have to be active for three years before school officials began seeing a noticeable impact.

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HERMISTON

'The Butler Did It, Again!' — or did he?

High school stages whodunit play

By TAMMY MALGESINI
East Oregonian

A play that spoofs murder mysteries will have the audience laughing during Hermiston High School's fall drama production.

"The Butler Did It, Again!" centers around a party thrown by Miss Maple, a high society widow known for her unique weekend gatherings. She invites a group of mystery writers to a Southern mansion where she plans to introduce horror author Ruth Dice. When the other writers realize Ruth has gained favor in Miss Maple's publishing company, they become willing to do anything — from solving a murder or even committing one themselves.

"People like murder mysteries ... and this one is making fun of the mystery writers," said director Dana Mercer. "It's pretty witty. There's a bunch of slapstick."

The play will be staged Thursday through Saturday at 7 p.m. in the school's auditorium, 600 S. First St., Hermiston. The cost is \$6 for adults, \$4 for students, and free for senior citizens and HHS students with ASB cards.

Playwright Tim Kelly,



Staff photo by Tammy Malgesini

Hermiston High School drama students rehearse the dinner party arrival scene for "The Butler Did It, Again!" The play will be staged Thursday through Saturday at 7 p.m. in the school's auditorium.

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— Dana Mercer, director

Mercer said, geared the content of the play for high school productions. Because of that, she said, it's a fun play that's appropriate for all ages.

"I like that any age can go to it and find something they like," she said.

During the theme party gathering, the mystery-writing guests are to come dressed and play the roles of the fictional investigators they've created. This aspect of the production, Mercer said, resulted in a lot of creativity and amusement

with the costuming.

As Ruth Dice's popularity wanes, a storm brews — both within the party and the weather outside. And, of course, in keeping with the classic murder mystery scenario, someone winds up dead after a brief blackout.

For more information, call 541-667-6100.

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HERMISTON

Volunteers needed for Rose Festival parade

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

The Hermiston City Council wants to bring its message that life is sweet to the Portland Rose Festival next year.

City manager Byron Smith told the council on Monday that organizers of the Grand Floral Parade approached the city about sending a float to the 2017 parade.

"It would be a great way to showcase our community," Smith said.

The parade has a "mini-float" program with slots for 15 Oregon cities each year to put a small float built around a golf cart in the parade. The floats must be made of all organic material, such as flowers and different colors of seeds and beans.

Hundreds of thousands of people turn out for the parade each year or watch it on television. Mayor David Drotzmann said he thought the parade would be an "awesome opportunity" to show off the city's new logo and brand to people across the state.

Councilors said it would be important to begin now to find community volunteers willing to spearhead the effort and make sure the final

product was something the community could be proud of.

"It's a great idea but very, very labor intensive at the end," Jackie Myers said.

The city does not have to officially commit until February, so councilors directed staff to begin searching for community members interested in taking the project on. The Rose Festival will take place the weekends between May 27 and June 12.

On Monday the council also re-approved its financial policies and approved a supplemental budget. The city had expected to pay to drain the lagoons at the recycled water treatment plant during the previous fiscal year but did not do so until later in the summer, meaning the money had to be re-appropriated into the 2016-2017 budget. Draining the lagoons of solid waste and taking it to the landfill cost \$1,390,100 plus \$9,880 for engineering costs and \$22,220 for pump repairs.

Smith said there was more material in the lagoon than expected, which is why the cost came close to \$1.4 million instead of the \$1 million the council was told last year.

"Forty percent is a big miss," Drotzmann responded. "Wasn't that the engineer's job to tell us?"

Smith said it was the first time emptying the lagoons with the new wastewater treatment system, which filters more solids out of the water than the old system, so in the future the engineers will have a better idea of costs.

On an unrelated note, he reported that the city tested all of its drinking fountains and none of them had dangerous levels of lead.

The first few minutes of the council's regular session were packed with people in red shirts bearing the words "I Love My City." The shirts are part of a campaign by Hermiston Assembly of God to spread acts of service and positivity around the city.

"It's good to see a full house and I love to see what's on the T-shirts the full house is wearing," Drotzmann said.

He said the group was helping their community without any expectation of reward, but he felt it was important to invite them to the council meeting to recognize their work.

Pastor Terry Haight said he had gotten calls from 10 different religious leaders since the group's first activity

in October, asking to help out with future projects. They will be providing free gift wrapping in the Wal-Mart parking lot the weekend before Christmas and hope to continue performing acts of service throughout the coming year.

The city council meeting began with a work session about rules for the city committees. Smith said there had been some confusion about vague rules — whether city council representatives to the committee counted toward a quorum, for example.

The council discussed adjusting the size of some committees and making rules about terms and other aspects more uniform across committees. They also supported Smith's suggestion of holding a training with committee members, particularly committee chairs, on public records and public meeting laws.

Smith said he would work with city attorney Gary Luisi to draft an ordinance spelling out rules for committees and bring it back to the council at a later date.

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Meeting to weigh in on Columbia River System

By GEORGE PLAVERN
East Oregonian

Members of the public are invited to weigh in on how the federal government should operate each of 14 dams on the Columbia River System during a meeting Thursday in Walla Walla.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and Bureau of Reclamation have five years to update an environmental impact statement, or EIS, for the river system, which broadly addresses how the dams should be run to protect everything from fish and wildlife to flood control.

Dams on the Columbia River System are spread out between Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana within the interior Columbia Basin. They include: Bonneville, The Dalles, John Day, McNary, Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose, Lower Granite, Dworshak, Albani Falls, Grand Coulee, Chief Joseph, Libby and Hungry Horse.

BPA spokesman David Wilson said the agencies intended to update the existing EIS, which is 25 years old, even before U.S. District Court Judge Michael Simon essentially expedited the process as part of his ruling to protect endangered salmon runs.

Earlier this year, Simon rejected the feds' 2014 biological opinion intended to safeguard salmon. Among the issues, Simon found that agencies needed to update their EIS of the entire Columbia River System, which in turn would support the opinion on salmon.

Wilson said the EIS will consider a range of alternatives that analyze impacts on navigation, hydropower, irrigation and flood risk management, in addition to fisheries. But first, the agencies have kicked off a series of public scoping meetings to gather input

from communities affected by the river system.

"The federal government is in listening mode," Wilson said. "What the EIS looks at exactly will be determined by the scoping process."

The closest meeting to Pendleton and Hermiston will be held Thursday at the Courtyard Walla Walla, 550 W. Rose St., from 4-7 p.m. The scoping process will run through Jan. 17, 2017, and a final EIS won't be done likely until 2021.

One of the signature issues raised is the potential breaching of four dams on the Lower Snake River. In his earlier ruling, Judge Simon stated that a proper analysis of protecting Snake River salmon runs "may well require" considering removing one or more of those dams.

"Dam breaching will likely be one of the actions analyzed in the EIS," Wilson said.

While the dams hamper fish migration, they also provide about 5 percent of the Northwest's hydroelectric power, according to a recent Associated Press report. BPA estimates that replacing the Lower Snake dams' production with natural gas would cost between \$274 million and \$372 million annually.

BPA is in charge of marketing and selling electricity generated off the Columbia River System. The Bureau of Reclamation operates and maintains two of the 14 dams — Grand Coulee and Hungry Horse — while the U.S. Army Corps operates the other 12.

Alternatives developed in the EIS will take a look at both system operations and structural modifications at the dams moving forward.

"We're taking comments so we can look at all options," Wilson said.

For more information on ways to comment, visit www.crso.info or call 1-800-290-5033.

Sheriff's office continues search for dead man's relatives

East Oregonian

The Umatilla County Sheriff's office continues to search for relatives of a man whose body was found almost two weeks ago.

"We think we located a relative in Mexico," undersheriff Jim Littlefield said. "But we haven't been able to contact them."

The body was found Nov. 4 at the Sand Station Recreation Area on Highway 730, about 10 miles northeast

of Hermiston. Littlefield reported fingerprints revealed the identity and the sheriff's office wanted to notify any relatives before making that information public.

That, however, is the sticking point. Littlefield said the person may not have had local relatives. Detectives, though, were working on that Tuesday and the sheriff's office said it would release the identity as soon as it was able.