

SCHOOL: Pendleton graduation rate is up

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Assessments
It's the tale of two districts when it comes to the English language arts portion of the Smarter Balanced Assessment for high school juniors.

During the 2016-2017 school year, 61.8 percent Pendleton's 11th graders scored a 3 or 4 in English, a steep drop from the 77.1 percent the year before and far below the state average and the average for similar districts.

Matt Yoshioka, Pendleton's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, said the district needs to take a closer look at the data to get a better idea of how to improve scores.

"We need to dig deeper," he said.

By the time students reach their junior year, Yoshioka said many have already completed enough work samples that they no longer need to pass Smarter Balanced as a requirement for graduation. As a result, they don't take the test seriously or perform well.

It was a different story for Hermiston.

Despite having 38 percent English language learners at the high school level, 77.4 percent of Hermiston juniors got top scores in language arts, outpacing the 71.1 percent state average and the score for similar districts.

Hermiston Assistant Superintendent Bryn Browning said she was proud that almost every grade level performed better than the state and similar-school average.

She said the improved English score can be attributed to the hard work of the high school staff, including both language arts teachers and other teachers who have language components in their curriculum.

But Browning also noticed that middle school scores took a step back.

"We weren't working with the best educational resources," she said.

2016-2017 Report Cards

PENDLETON SCHOOL DISTRICT

English language arts*	Math*
3-5: 46.1% (-3)	3-5: 44.9% (-0.6)
6-8: 47.1% (-8.7)	6-8: 39.5% (+2.9)
11: 61.8% (-15.3)	11: 27.8% (+2.7)
High school regular attenders: 76.2% (-3.3)	
2015-16 graduation rate: 83.9% (+9.4)	
2016-17 freshman on-track to graduate: 74.9% (-4.8)	

HERMISTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

English language arts*	Math*
3-5: 50.4% (-3.1)	3-5: 51.5% (+3.7)
6-8: 50% (-5.3)	6-8: 39% (-3)
11: 77.4% (+11.3)	11: 31.3% (+12)
High school regular attenders: 71.1% (+3.8)	
2015-16 graduation rate: 65.7% (+1.6)	
2016-17 freshman on-track to graduate: 83.8% (-0.9)	

*Percentage of students who score at Level 3 & 4

Hermiston adopted a new math curriculum at the beginning of the school year, about two years after the state's adoption schedule. As teachers and students start to familiarize themselves with the new curriculum, Browning anticipates scores rising.

Graduation rate

Pendleton and Hermiston's graduation data are an inverse of one another.

Pendleton's 2015-2016 graduation rate was 83.9 percent, a more than 9-point improvement from the year before when it was around the state average. But its 2016-2017 freshman class is on-track to graduate at only a 74.9 percent rate.

Regardless of test scores, Yoshioka said spurring students toward graduation is always the most important goal of every teacher from kindergarten through 12th grade. Additionally, Pendleton has a track record of turning a relatively low on-track rate into a higher graduation rate.

In Hermiston, district seniors' 65.7 graduation rate, significantly lower than both the state and similar school average, was contrasted with a 83.8 percent on-track rate.

Browning said the district does take some optimism from the high on-track rate. She added that the high school's efforts to broaden its course offerings and hire a graduation coach

will eventually be reflected in the data.

Attendance

The number of Pendleton and Hermiston high school students who are defined as "regular attenders" — students who attend school at a 90 percent clip or more — are well below the rest of their peers at other grade levels.

Browning said Hermiston's 71.1 percent rate is actually higher than the 67.3 percent state rate and the high school is working diligently to continue the upswing.

Yoshioka said regular attenders rates, like Pendleton's 76.2 percent, are generally sub-par in high schools across Oregon.

He said attendance tends to drop more as high schoolers get closer to finishing school.

Sometimes it's a case of "senioritis." Other times, it's students who realize their credit deficient as they're entering their last year of high school, their discouragement fueling their lack of attendance.

Weather could also play a role in poor attendance: Yoshioka said last year's preponderance of snow days suppressed attendance, not only on the day itself, but on the days before and after.

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Customers order at Delish Bistro on Thursday in Hermiston.

FOOD: Selection has diversified over the last few years

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Most customers at the current location order on a takeout basis or eat in the tent-covered seating outside, but co-owner LaNae Hull said the move will allow for an expanded menu of entrées and a full liquor license in addition to more indoor seating.

Hull said one reason Delish Bistro has done well is likely that it offers some dishes that other restaurants in town don't, particularly its Hawaiian-style plate lunches.

"Our number one seller is teriyaki chicken," she said. The bistro's other most popular items are its burgers, and it also offers gelato and the rotating seasonal menu of options like the pear & bleu cheese sandwich and butternut squash soup. Hull said she often gets requests for types of fare people have trouble finding in Hermiston, like Italian.

"Someone was asking about fettuccine alfredo the other day," Hull said. "The menu is pretty full for the fall but we are doing lasagna this winter."

Greater Hermiston Area Chamber of Commerce director Debbie Pedro said people seem hungry for new dining experiences.

"Everyone is excited for

something new, that's what I've noticed about Hermiston," she said.

She said restaurants that come in with a unique type of cuisine, like the Kobe Hibachi Sushi restaurant that opened last year or the Veg Out salad restaurant, seem to do particularly well. Pedro said over the last few years that Hermiston's restaurant selection has diversified.

There are still niches to fill, however. Pedro said she hears a lot that Hermiston needs a sit-down Italian restaurant or a seafood restaurant.

She said there are other factors at play that help determine if a restaurant will last in Hermiston. Some establishments have adapted to the market by adding live entertainment on weekends, delivery services or other offerings to make them stand out from the competition.

"I think the biggest thing that makes a restaurant successful is great customer service, and great quality food," she said.

Despite frequent complaints from locals on Facebook that Hermiston needs more restaurants or more variety, several of Hermiston's eating establishments have gotten high marks on the business-reviewing site Yelp, often from non-Hermiston

residents who said they were pleasantly surprised to find such good food in Hermiston.

"I am amazed that this high quality sushi was found in Hermiston! What a great hole-in-the-wall restaurant to have in Eastern Oregon," Marissa B. of Las Vegas wrote of Kobe Hibachi Sushi in April.

"We drove off the beaten path because I spotted the Yelp reviews for Walkers while heading east from Portland and I can assure you, when we are driving east, we will never stop anywhere else again," Heatherly O. of Lake Oswego wrote about Walker's Farm Kitchen in January.

Top-rated Hermiston restaurants on the site, with 4.5 stars after more than 30 reviews, include Walker's Farm Kitchen with 110 reviews, Lawan's Thai Garden with 65, Kobe Hibachi Sushi with 36 and Delish Bistro with 31.

Hermiston has 58 restaurants with ratings on Yelp, approximately one restaurant per 298 people living within city limits, compared to 61 restaurants listed in Pendleton, at one restaurant per 276 residents. Four of Pendleton's restaurants are listed as Mexican restaurants, compared to 16 of Hermiston's.

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