

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OTHER VIEWS

Problems emerging in Oregon’s schools

The Oregonian

Two recent developments encapsulate the lethargic state of leadership in Oregon education these days. The Oregon Department of Education released the results of standardized exams taken by public school students last year. The overall takeaways: Math scores are declining, language arts scores are stagnant and some of the state’s data is unreliable due to many students skipping the test. Yet there was little urgency in director Colt Gill’s public remarks about the need to improve Oregon’s bleak situation. Then, just hours later, the Oregon Board of Education voted to loosen requirements on how much school time districts must provide students in their senior year. Instead of pushing for full schedules that will best prepare students for college or career, the board authorized a swath of exemptions that let districts offer seniors who are “on track” to graduate fewer classes, provided their local school boards agree. The decision marks a reversal from the strong stand the board took just three years ago after parents protested the “part-time” education that Portland Public Schools provided high school students. It’s almost as if state education leaders are content with the lack of progress for Oregon’s students. And, apparently, they think it’s fine for thousands of students to skip tests designed to show whether the education system is improving. It appears they also believe that “on track” for earning enough high school credits to graduate means a student is fully equipped for college. That conclusion is at odds with the reality that many Oregon graduates have to take remedial courses before enrolling in college-credit classes. In fact, more than one-quarter of the 2017 Portland Public Schools high school graduates who enrolled in Portland Community College in fall 2017 had to take a “pre-college” math class, according to PCC.

Both of these developments should motivate Oregonians to step up their pressure on state and local leaders to treat Oregon’s persistent education failures with the urgency they require. Continuing down the path of least resistance only guarantees that Oregon’s students will continue to be underprepared. And while Oregonians can and should support increased education funding, they should insist on an ambitious strategy that smartly spends money in ways that make a difference. Unfortunately, when faced with the opportunity to rally Oregonians with a clear vision of what the state plans to achieve, however, Gill and the state education board punted. Gill did not respond to requests from the *The Oregonian* editorial board to discuss the test results or instructional time rollback. But he did comment on the test results in a press release: “Annual tests give us a snapshot of student learning, but there is more we should be doing to give teachers the tools to target complex thinking in students. ... Shorter, more focused testing throughout the year can give teachers insights into activities that can help students think and work out problems. That is how we get better results.” If “that” is the strategy Gill is offering to improve students’ outcomes, then Oregonians should steel themselves for more of the same: third-worst graduation rate in the country; a widening achievement gap that leaves low-income and minority populations behind; persistently mediocre test scores; and an epidemic of students graduating from high school without mastery of basic material needed for entry-level college courses. Instead, Gill could have explained how the state will take lessons learned from low-income and diverse districts like McMinnville, whose students are handily outperforming the state average in math, as *The Oregonian*’s Betsy Hammond reported. Or he could have talked about



Parents and students fill out paperwork in their classroom during a September 2016 open house at the new Washington Elementary School in Pendleton. EO file photo

how the state will improve student participation in test-taking, by showing families that these tests are critical to assessing the system’s progress as a whole and determining whether key efforts to support minority and low-income students are working. He could have said any number of things to assure Oregonians that he and Gov. Kate Brown recognize the state is unacceptably failing its students. A lackluster response, however, seems to be the norm. The state board of education, whose voting members are appointed by the governor, similarly failed to champion students’ needs when it voted Thursday to change its instructional time policy. Instead, at the behest of the Oregon School Boards Association and the Confederation of School Administrators, the state board authorized four exemptions to the current policy that requires school districts to ensure that at least 80 percent of students in a school receive 966 hours of instruction in a year. School districts need only get permission from their local school boards to enact the exemptions, which allow for scheduling fewer classes for students who are “on track” to earn enough credits to graduate. But a student can be on track while failing to show proficiency in a subject, like math. Shouldn’t they be

scheduled to repeat such coursework in high school rather than be forced to pay for remedial classes at college? It’s difficult to see how the instructional-time decision squares with Brown’s newly professed interest in extending the school year to 180 days. This doesn’t give anyone a longer school day. And while the education department sought to celebrate the “flexibility” that this new policy will give students, it’s the district administrators who will benefit. Districts can continue to collect Oregon taxpayer dollars meant for educating thousands of seniors full time, while offering them a part-time schedule. Those dollars can then be used to backfill any number of other expenses, administrative, programmatic or otherwise. Thankfully, the state education board explicitly said that seniors who proactively demand a full schedule should be allowed to have one. A small victory — and one that will likely benefit only students with the most-engaged parents. Oregonians should insist their local school boards reject exemptions that cheat students out of their education. With education “leaders” standing on the sidelines, parents, students and community members will need to light the way.

OTHER VIEWS

Families and communities can make a difference

Isolated and alone — oftentimes, that’s how individuals who experience mental or substance use disorders feel — and every year, thousands of Oregonians experience these conditions.

This sense of remoteness can be even more pronounced in rural areas. It is crucial that we reach out to offer support to our neighbors who are facing mental and substance use challenges. In fact, we need to create environments and relationships that promote a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Support from families is essential to recovery, so we must equip family members with the right tools and start conversations about prevention, treatment, and recovery. Too many people are still unaware that mental and substance use disorders can be successfully treated, just like other health conditions, and recovery is possible.

Having worked with providers of mental health and substance use disorders for over 20 years, I have witnessed the positive reality of recovery. Individuals who embrace recovery achieve improved mental and physical health, and form stronger relationships with their children, families, neighbors, and peers. A recent survey published in the *Journal, Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, concluded that 9.1 percent of the adult population has successfully resolved a substance use disorder. Recovery is not only a possibility — it is a reality for thousands of Oregonians.

Mental and substance use disorders can affect members of any of our families. People need to know help is available. These individuals can get better, both physically and emotionally, with the

support of their community and family. Family and communities can find hope and spread the message that recovery works by celebrating the annual National Recovery Month (Recovery Month), an initiative sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Let people know that free, confidential help is available 24 hours a day through the Alcohol and Drug Helpline operated by Lines for Life at 1-800-923-4357 (Text: Recovery Now to 839863), and national lines supported by SAMHSA: National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD). Additionally, you can provide information about local treatment and recovery resources on your website and link to tools available at <https://recoverymonth.gov/events/plan-events/social-media-tools>.

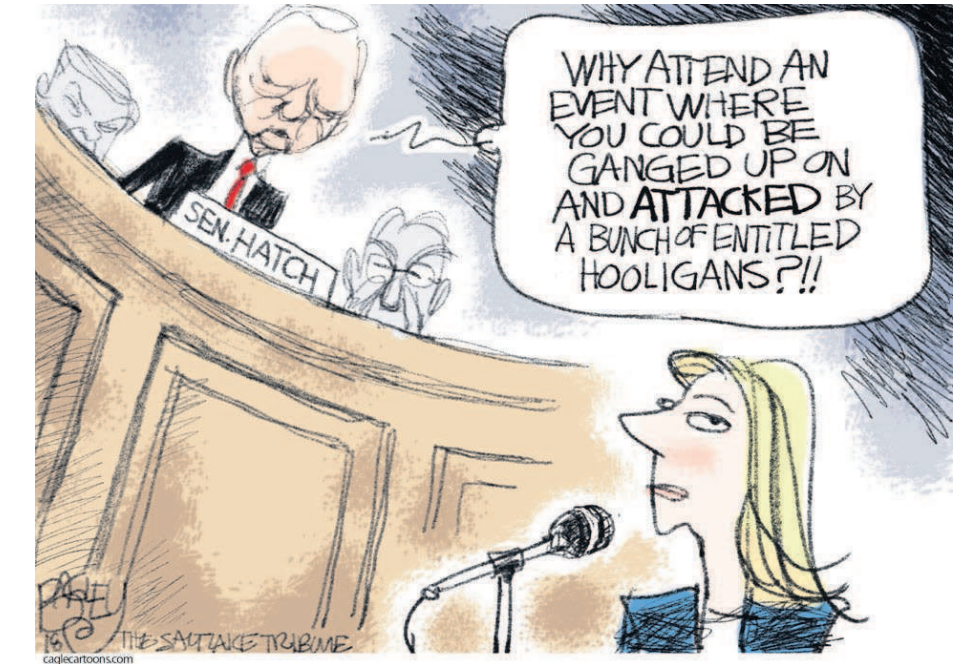
Events celebrating Recovery Month are often sponsored by local treatment and recovery advocacy organizations throughout Oregon to honor individuals and families who are in long-term recovery. Your attendance will demonstrate the support of the recovery community, including those who provide prevention, treatment, and recovery support services.

Offering support to those experiencing mental and substance use disorders can make a huge difference. Together we can help people realize the promise of recovery and give families, facing what seem like insurmountable challenges, the support to help their loved ones.

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YOUR VIEWS

Rural resilience

As I contemplated the recent summer burn bans, I worried that perhaps my children will never remember a summer night of roasted marshmallows over a roaring campfire. Maybe instead, with watery eyes and burning lungs, they’ll find ashes raining like snow from a burnt orange sky commonplace. We’re already seeing crop and livestock losses due to drought, fire and flooding. What’s worse is that no one is going to protect us when it’s too late. Rural areas, like Baker County, are particularly vulnerable to global climate volatility due to physical isolation, lack of economic diversity, an aging population and high levels of poverty. The relatively limited diversity in our economy here means that inevitable changes in a single traditional economic sector, such as agriculture, can place a huge and disproportionate tension on community stability. Our representative, Greg Walden, responds to the climate call with half-baked ideas about forest thinning and moving funds from one allocation to another. Meanwhile, he thinks that we rural Oregonians are simple-minded enough to

accept the short-term employment benefit of further oil exploration and coal-fired power plants. Destroying the few valuable resources remaining while the threat of a greater issue literally stifles the air we breathe is an insult to our intelligence and way of life. I wish I could say that Walden’s motive was to actually stimulate job creation, but the truth is he has been bought, just as many senior congressional representatives have. Just as a beating heart needs fresh blood to keep pumping, our economy needs a fresh supply of diverse industries to sustain itself. Jamie McLeod-Skinner, candidate for Congress in our district, understands that. She knows that in order to support our rural way of life, we have to stop putting all our stock in an antiquated and economically unviable, non-renewable industry like coal. She understands that the best investment in our community is in initiatives that enable our community to sustain itself. If we work together to elect representatives that are not in the pocket of big gas and oil, we can protect ourselves before it’s too late.

Anna Morgan-Hayes
La Grande

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