

## EDUCATION: Hiring speech language pathologists, psychologists still a challenge

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Wilson said to be placed in special programs, a student has to go through an assessment. If a teacher or parent thinks a child might need special services, the district has evaluation specialists who will determine what services, if any they need to receive.

The Oregon Department of Education releases an annual special education report card. In 2016-2017, Hermiston was below the state target for some areas of special education, such as students with IEPs (individualized education programs) graduating. Hermiston had 43 percent of its students with IEPs graduate in four years, as opposed to the state's target of 78 percent.

In other areas, Hermiston measured close to or better than the state average.

District students with IEPs were below the state average for grade level standards of students with IEPs, but exceeded the state average for alternate standards in all categories: English language arts and math at all levels.

About 79 percent of parents with kids in special programs surveyed said the district had facilitated parental involvement with a goal of improving services. The state target for school-prompted parental involvement is 77.7 percent.

### Making changes

Though Hermiston has retained some strategies and many staff members, the way special programs operates is different from the days before it left the Inter-Mountain Educational Service District (IMESD).

It has been nearly four years since Hermiston left

the ESD, stating it wanted to have more control over funds the ESD gets from per-student payments from the state. When Hermiston left, it took control of its special programs and services like assessment and evaluation, speech language pathologists (SLPs) and school psychologists.

Wilson said staffing levels didn't really change. There are about 30 staff members in special programs. But, he said, the level of access between schools and special educators, as well as the roles of special programs staff, are different.

Wilson said that while the ESD always met service requirements for students on IEPs (individualized education programs), having their services in-district has allowed them some more efficiency.

Because the ESD serves 19 districts from Morrow County to Baker County, he said there were times when Hermiston would have to postpone helping a student because a provider, such as an SLP, would be in another district that day.

"Through no fault of their own, the ESD couldn't drop everything," he said. "Now we can respond instantly."

IMESD Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said staff levels in the IMESD are also about the same as before. It now has 13 full-time school psychologists, compared with 13.5 before Hermiston's departure. There are now 15 speech language pathologists, as opposed to 16 before the split.

But Mulvihill said while specialists would have to travel to several different districts, most IMESD providers live in or near the districts they serve.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris  
Instructor Kendra Scott asks her students to name things they are thankful for during class on Nov. 1 at Rocky Heights Elementary School in Hermiston.

The increased focus on Hermiston also let evaluation specialists tailor assessments more specifically to each student.

Wilson said they discovered some of their assessments were culturally biased, and a disproportionate number of students were being identified as special needs when the issue was actually related to language or culture.

"We've tried to tailor our assessments to remove as much cultural bias as possible," he said.

But hiring speech language pathologists and school psychologists is still a challenge for both entities, and Wilson said there tends to be more turnover in those positions.

He said the district struggled with speech therapy for a while, but quickly realized that speech therapy by video, or "teletherapy," was not working.

"Parents resoundingly said it was not effective," he said. The district now uses an outside agency, called the Hello Foundation, to provide speech therapy, which operates on-site.

Mulvihill said the ESD still provides several services to Hermiston.

The ESD funds programs from a few different sources. The majority of the programs Hermiston opted out of are covered by the IMESD's general fund. About 95 percent of that money went to the schools, based on how many students they have enrolled, and about 5 percent goes to the ESD itself.

Mulvihill said when Hermiston withdrew, they received about \$2.4 million. But the ESD also provides some services that are based on state and federal grants. Hermiston still receives several services, including for autism, deaf and hard of

hearing students, vision and traumatic brain injuries.

"We have to serve the kids that reside in those towns, not the districts," Mulvihill said.

### Parental involvement

Wilson said parents are constantly included, with both sides helping students understand what behaviors are acceptable at school and at home.

"One of the keys is partnerships with home," he said. "Behavior needs to be reinforced there."

Debbie and Angelo Herrera have a daughter who is now 15, and has received special services in Hermiston since she was a small child.

Angelo said there have been some ups and downs since the switch from the ESD.

"The first thing that comes to mind is the turnover," he said. "It seems like there's always an SLP

job open."

Previously, he said, their daughter had the same SLPs since she was in elementary school.

"Now she has a pretty good rapport with the girls," Debbie said. "But it took a little bit."

Another parent, Brandalynn Gorman, has had some complaints. She said her son, who is autistic, had been violent with another student in class, lashing out due to a sensory disorder. After suspending him several times this year, his school attempted to shorten his day. But Gorman said they tried to do so without her permission. She said she was in the middle of working through the situation with the district, but so far was dissatisfied with the way things had been going.

Wilson said he could not comment on the specific incident. He said sometimes staff will recommend a shortened day for a student if they feel it's beneficial. But he said they will not do so without the input of the parent.

Angelo said he doesn't feel that services are vastly better in Hermiston now, but said they have the potential to be.

But he added that some people expect services to improve for their child automatically, without advocating for them.

"We get involved," he said. "You can't just expect things to happen, there's got to be some follow through."

"But when we talk to special programs, they're usually listening," Debbie said.

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## VETS: Students also honored veterans at an assembly

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ese Barnes and Lexie Cox were the parade's announcers and shared facts about Veterans Day with the people lined up near city hall. Afterward, Barnes said she loves Veterans Day because she has veterans in her family, including her father, and so it means a lot to her to see people give thanks to those who have served.

"I think it's important because so many people are laying down their lives for us, and we should be celebrating every day, but this is one day we can definitely honor them," she said.

During the parade, a young man broke off from the group and came over to a group of veterans watching the parade. He shook each of their hands, thanking them for their service, before running back to join his class.

Melanie Humbert, an eighth-grader, said she thought it was important for the school to show respect to community members who have served. The annual parade is a way to do that, she said, as well as showing respect for the country's flag.

Students also honored veterans at an assembly on Thursday afternoon, where each of the veterans in attendance were asked by name to stand while students read information about their service. There were also songs, poems and a statement by U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, read by his field representative Jessica Keys.

The keynote speaker was Chuck Sams, communications director for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. He was an Intelligence Specialist Second Class Petty Officer in the U.S. Navy, on active duty from 1988-1992 and in the reserves from 1992-1995.

Sams — who is Cayuse, Walla Walla, Cocopah, and Yankton Sioux — said he comes from a "warrior culture" where people feel a responsibility to protect the lands they love.

"My people fought to protect these lands since time immemorial," he said.

But veterans, more than



Staff photo by E.J. Harris  
Third-grader David Owen holds a miniature U.S. flag while marching with his classmates in a Veterans Day parade on Thursday in Echo.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris  
Echo sophomore Kenneth Troxell, left, shakes hands with Pendleton veteran Thomas Tangney during a Veterans Day parade Thursday in Echo.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris  
An Echo grade-schooler, back, carries the letter "R" with her classmates while representing the U.S. Army and marching with his classmates at the Veterans Day parade on Thursday in Echo.

any other people, can tell you of their love of peace, he said. When a country goes to war it is because their politicians failed.

Sams stood in the

crow's nest of an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf on Jan. 16, 1991, and watched the beginning of Operation Desert Storm as planes took off to bomb

"Veterans in your community continue to serve today"

— Chuck Sams,

Communications director for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

Iraqi forces in Kuwait.

"I can still feel that in my bones," he said, describing how a friend put his arm around him and said they had joined their forefathers as war veterans.

He dedicated his talk to two of his friends whose plane didn't return: Tom Costen and Charles Turner.

Sams said veterans come back from their service with a love of country that continues as they serve in other ways, from volunteering as coaches to raising money for nonprofits.

"Veterans in your community continue to serve today," he said.

After the assembly, veterans were escorted through a path of students cheering for them and invited to stay for cake and a "wax museum" made up of the students who had dressed as famous veterans.

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## RADIO: Ads aren't only action district is taking

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adopted strategic plan, which has a goal to "Establish and maintain the Pendleton School District brand."

While the district's other three goals in the plan are meant to address academic performance, the branding goal is designed to boost the public's perception of the district in town and beyond.

Fritsch said he convened a committee of school officials and marketing professionals last spring to discuss strategies about how to promote the district.

One of the committee members was a representative for Elkhorn, a La Grande-based media group that owns several radio stations that can be heard throughout the county. The representative suggested Fritsch buy airtime with Elkhorn to get the district's message out.

Since mid-September, Fritsch has recorded a new ad each week promoting the district, which will run through the end of the year. Fritsch said sometimes the ads focus on specific events while other ads are more general topics on schools and education.

Pendleton School Board member Debbie McBee is another member of the district's branding committee.

McBee said she often heard Walla Walla School District radio ads in Pendleton and was frustrated that there was nothing on the airwaves to promote the hometown district.

She supports the district's foray into paid advertising because radio ads could reach an audience that don't read the newspaper or learn about the district through other media outlets.

The district will distribute a survey to parents and survey members at the end of the year to determine whether the radio ads are reaching local audiences and if they're effective in painting a positive portrait

of the district.

McBee said that if the survey returns prove that the ads are ineffective, the district should stop airing radio ads and spend the money elsewhere.

The ads aren't the only action the district is taking to better communicate and market itself.

The district now updates its website regularly with profiles on new teachers and other positive stories on the district. Fritsch said the district is also doing something similar, internally, by highlighting district achievements in emails to staff.

The district's promotional push isn't meant to just improve its reputation, but also to help reverse a longterm decline in enrollment.

"With the multitude of educational opportunities of the 21st century including private schools, charter schools and online schools, the Pendleton School District must be more progressive in promoting and marketing of our investment in our staff, responsiveness to student needs and our innovative programs that are available to local students and their families," the plan states.

Some of the ways the district plans to measure the success of its branding effort include an increase in student enrollment and a positive trend in its migration data, which measures students enrolling versus students leaving.

Fritsch said he doesn't want to use the ads to "cherry pick" students from other nearby districts, but McBee said the ads could help stem off enrollment declines while enrolling to parents who commute into Pendleton for work but live with their families elsewhere.

The district's branding effort is far from a finished product. McBee said the district is developing full-fledged communication and marketing plans that will include new initiatives.