

# Gap: Local districts see rise in graduation rates

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Across all grade levels, she said, they're focusing on more attendance efforts.

"I think we're breaking down silos of work," she said. "We're not looking at anything different for next year, we're looking at staying the course."

On its face, the Pendleton School District had a status quo year for graduation rate.

The district's graduation rate dropped by nearly 2 points, but its 81 percent rate is still higher than the state average.

But drilling down into the data reveals some victories and some setbacks for Pendleton. Matt Yoshioka, the district's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, highlighted the growth in the American Indian graduation rate, long a sore spot in the district's performance.



Hermiston grads toss their mortarboards into the air during the school's 2018 commencement exercises at the Toyota Center in Kennewick.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney, File

Although Native American students still graduate at a lesser rate than their white peers, their 71 percent clip represented a more than 17-point boost from the year before.

Yoshioka attributed much of the progress to improved performance to

Nixyaawii Community School, the Umatilla Indian Reservation charter school where a majority of the student body is Native American. Nixyaawii's graduation rate jumped nearly 17 points to 58.8 percent in 2017-18.

The district's 85 percent on-track rate for freshmen

also suggests that the school system will have solid graduation rates in the future.

But not all of Pendleton's data trended positively.

Yoshioka said the district wants to work on reducing the school system's 4.2 percent dropout rate, which is higher than both the state

average and Umatilla County's average.

The district also continues to be the tale of two high schools. While Pendleton High School graduated 89.7 percent of its seniors, only 30.8 percent graduated from Hawthorne Alternative High School, the same exact figure as the year before.

Yoshioka said the district has already made efforts to improve outcomes at Hawthorne, including increased staffing levels and offering a "hybrid" approach where students split their time between Hawthorne and Pendleton High School to keep them engaged.

Other schools in Umatilla County saw improvement, as well. Umatilla School District cleared the statewide rate by nearly six points, graduating students at a rate of 84.16 percent in 2017-18. Their rates were up from 81.72 percent the pre-

vious year.

Superintendent Heidi Sipe said via email that she was proud of students' continued success, but their goal is still helping all students receive a high school diploma, whether in four years or a few years longer.

"We continue to welcome our non-completing students back until age 21 to finish their diplomas," Sipe said.

"While those students do not always count in graduation calculations, they count in our community and we are honored to support students until they earn their diplomas."

Stanfield School District fell just below the state average, with a 76.92 percent graduation rate. Stanfield had 42 students in its 2017-18 class.

Echo School graduated 87.5 percent of its students, in a class of 34 students.

# Delays: Owners discuss reasons behind long waits for construction

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Often construction delays don't come down to one specific problem. Allan Lambert of Affordable Family Eyewear said their remodel of a building on the corner of Northeast Third Street and Gladys Avenue has been prolonged by a combination of "self-inflicted" problems and things out of their control.

The sign on the building originally said "Coming in Summer." Then it was changed to "Coming in Autumn." Now Lambert said he thinks they might be done in April.

"I guess we were a little optimistic," he said.

For Affordable Family Eyewear, there hasn't been one major roadblock, just a series of smaller delays. Every time an appraiser or contractor says they'll be there in three weeks and it turns out to be eight, that adds up, Lambert said. New banking laws have also set up more hoops to jump through before getting financing, stretching out the process.

"It used to be once you got the appraisal, you were good to go," he said.

Deciding to save money by doing some work themselves has added more time than expected as well. The building — which has served as everything from a Sears to a church — is getting an extensive makeover with a completely new layout.

Lambert said new "to do" items keep popping up as they go along. They decided to double-insulate all the interior walls with sound-proofing materials, for example, because they plan to lease part of the building to professionals such as lawyers and doctors, who want to keep conversations confidential.

Still, he said, they are



Financing has held up Delish Bistro's planned move into the old Stet's Steakhouse in Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

lucky to be able to continue operating out of their current building they can stay in until the remodel is finished, and they are excited about the chance to customize a new, larger office.

Another business move still waiting to happen is Delish Bistro, which is located at 1725 N. First Street but is also leasing the former Stet's Steakhouse building on Highway 395. The bistro at one point was slated to move to the former steakhouse building in February 2018, but is still at its original location.

Herman Hull said the restaurant plans to remodel the kitchen before moving in, but is waiting on the financing to do it.

"It's going to be a while yet," he said.

The move will provide indoor seating, and a larger kitchen will open up new options on the menu. If any-

one is interested in participating in a private financing initiative — 9 percent annual interest paid monthly — they should get in touch with Delish Bistro, Hull said.

The Union Club, a project that originally envisioned a summer 2018 opening, is now looking at opening its doors during the upcoming summer instead.

"Obviously I can't say anything with complete assurance, because you've seen how it's been, but I'm more sure now that I have been," said Justin Doyle, one of the partners in the project.

The club will be a coffee-by-day, bar-by-night gathering space that plays homage to the original Union Club of the 1940s. The building on the corner of Main Street and Northeast Second Street, which was erected in 1906, was most recently home to Roe-

Marks Men's and Western Wear.

Doyle said he wasn't interested in recounting a blow-by-blow of what the holdups have been, but he did say that remodeling a historic building comes with extra challenges. It's a "game" of finding out which elements — plumbing, wiring, etc. — need replaced, and special care also needs to be taken to preserve the building's historical integrity as much as possible.

"It definitely adds additional layers of discovery, but the value of keeping the history alive outweighs all the difficulties," he said.

Doyle said they are getting ready to sign off on a bid and final design, however, and contractors should be starting on the four- to five-month project within weeks.

"It's been challenging, it's taken longer than

we thought, but we're still here," he said.

Other Hermiston-area projects delayed but still in the works include Ranch & Home. The retailer was originally slated to open by Jan. 1, 2018, but has yet to announce an opening date. While the company has mostly been silent about the construction process, it did cite a problem with finding electrical subcontractors when discussing an extension of its incentive package with the city of Hermiston in early 2018. Because the retailer missed a June 2018 deadline, it is missing out on \$100,000 in reimbursed development costs from the city of Hermiston.

The Maxwell Pavilion, originally slated to host the

summer 2018 farmer's market in Hermiston, is still putting finishing touches on the project after a disagreement between owner Mitch Meyers and the city's building department resulted in a stop-work order over the summer.

The city was set to build an RV park at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in time for the 2019 Umatilla County Fair, but a ruling by the city's own planning commission, banning construction at the site until an overflow parking plan is approved, has put the original timeline in doubt. The delay is far from the first construction delay for EOTEC.

In December the Washington State Department of Transportation announced that the Interstate 82 bridge across the Columbia River would not be finished in 2018 as originally planned, but instead finish up sometime in the spring or summer of 2019. The department blamed "additional work" that cropped up unexpectedly, causing workers to not get concrete pouring finished before the weather turned too poor to continue.

There is hope, however: Other Hermiston-area projects that were significantly delayed have opened in recent years. The Harker Senior Activity Center, delayed from a planned spring 2018 opening, opened in September 2018.

The Holiday Inn Express had its grand opening in February 2018 instead of October 2017.

And Shiki Hibachi Sushi, which displayed a sign announcing "opening soon" for more than a year, did open at the end of 2017 and is still in operation.

# Wildfire: Inter-agency team hopes to control drugs

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and Union counties, and the execution of multiple search warrants leading up to last week's busy day of arrests. Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus said he considers his office part of BENT, and his chief deputy, Jacklyn Jenkins, who has worked for years with the team and its detectives, was ready for the influx of cases.

"We knew all the information involving each individual," Primus said, "and which individuals were appropriate for charges and which charges were appropriate."

Primus also called Wildfire a boon for local communities. He and his family are in Pendleton, he said, and this police work makes the community feel safer.

Roberts said sweeps

like this let drug dealers know BENT is here and not going away, but the measure of success is difficult to quantify.

"The subjective standard for us is how soon can we start buying drugs again in the community," he said.

Big busts leave a "dry up effect" in their wake, Roberts said, which comes from taking drugs off the streets and from drug suppliers recognizing the area is hot with cops and not the best place to do business. Removing children from dangerous situations is itself a win, he said, and seizing the weapons could save lives.

"There's so many ways to analyze this, basically you can't put a realistic number on it," he said.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy, however, put BENT on a number — \$130,000. That's the

funding the federal agency provided to the team for 2018-19 to fight the drug war in Umatilla County and other federally designated High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas. BENT also receives a little money for police sales of property seizures.

The team consists of officers, detectives, and agents from local law enforcement, Oregon State Police and the FBI. Those agencies cover the wages and benefits of their personnel on the team.

Roberts said the amount of federal money fluctuates from a low of about \$110,000 to a high near \$135,000, and the federal budget cycle differs from the city's cycle, creating a bit of a dance to cover costs.

The team's funds go to a variety of activities, from leasing cars to stay under the radar of bad guys to

paying informants. That \$130,000 is not much, Roberts said, so BENT is frugal.

BENT can sustain itself for a few years if the feds cut the money, he also said, at least long enough until a new funding strategy comes along.

The team for the past several years focused on taking down bigger drug suppliers and the heads of criminal organizations. Wildfire was a turn toward the neighborhood. But drug busts at either end produce plenty of offenders willing to talk and cut themselves a deal.

Roberts said the situation resembles a "huge game of tag" with offenders "tagging" someone else so they can get out of a jam.

"At the end of the day," he said, "if you don't want to get jammed up, don't get involved in the activity."

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