

Schools:

Continued from Page A1

Dirk Dirksen is retiring as Morrow County School District superintendent after 11 years. During that span, he said, the district increased its graduation rate.

"We've always stayed above the state average, but we are well above it now," he said.

The Oregon Department of Education reports graduation rates statewide hover above 80%.

Dirksen said Morrow County schools are looking pretty good by comparison. He said 157 of 163 students in the 2022 cohort group were set to graduate on time, giving the district a graduation rate above 96%.

But this is an estimate, he added. No graduation rate is official until the ODE says so.

According to Dirksen, Irri-gon High had 47 graduates. Heppner High had 32, Riverside, 71 and Morrow Education, seven. The class also earned around \$2.5 million in scholarships.

"You really have to congratulate the students themselves for their dedication, their parents, teachers, administrators, all the people working hard to make sure (students) were able to get across the stage with a diploma," Dirksen said.

Plans beyond high school

Pendleton School District Superintendent Chris Fritsch reported 197 students took part in the high school's graduation survey of where gradu-



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

Echo senior Kolby Spurlock passes the "flame of education" to Logan Hansen as part of a graduation ceremony June 3, 2022. Echo High School graduated 15 students in year.

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— Beth Burton, Stanfield School District superintendent

ates are headed next:

- 3.5% are enlisting in the military.
- 5% heading to trade or career school.
- 11% are undecided.
- 18% are entering the workforce.

- 63% are bound for college or university, with 68 students going to a four-year school (31 staying in state, 37 going out of state).

PHS Class of 2022 also earned more than \$4.4 million in scholarships, and

80 students graduated with college credits.

Stanfield Secondary School graduated 38 students — 37 seniors and one junior, who managed to graduate early.

Beth Burton, Stanfield

School District superintendent, praised the graduates.

"I am sincerely happy for the Class of 2022," she said. "They completed high school during one of the most interesting and unique times in our country, and I think each of these students is stronger for it."

All of the school's seniors made it through this year, she said.

Burton boasted, 52% of this class has college plans for the fall. Nine students are going into the workforce, two students are entering the military and four students are going to trade school, she said.

Echo High School graduated 15 seniors, administrative secretary Mandy Palmateer, said, and each has plans to further their education with college. She said this is pretty common for Echo.

"We're obviously super proud of them," she said. "It's a big accomplishment. They've made it this far, and we're excited to see where they go in the future."

Normalcy returning

Umatilla High School graduated 90 of its 92 seniors on time, according to Heidi Sipe, Umatilla School District superintendent.

"We'd be happier if it was 92," she said. "I think that it's really important to recognize that the kids who graduated worked really hard to walk across that stage."

Two students worked especially hard, she said, as they earned their associate of arts transfer degrees. Marisol Santa Cruz and Thalia Trujillo are planning to continue their education

in the fall at Portland State University.

And a number of graduates earned their biliteracy seal from the Oregon Department of Education. The biliteracy seal indicates that a student has completed rigorous language testing in English and Spanish.

Dee Lorence, UHS counselor, shared yet another accomplishment of this class. She said scholarship and grant totals "should be between \$767,000-\$800,000 over two to four years."

Pilot Rock High School for the last two years held its graduation on the football field to meet pandemic restrictions. School District Administrator Annie Tester is retiring and said it felt good to have the graduation ceremony return to the school gym. Better still, she said, was having all 22 seniors graduate June 4 and one junior finish early.

"I have never, ever seen that happen," she said.

Pilot Rock enacted an alternative education program to help a few students. Online studies and an attentive teacher assisted them to the finish line, Tester said.

"We put in some safeguards," she said, and those safeguards made it possible for everyone to graduate on time.

Nine of the students combined received scholarship offers exceeding \$300,000, she said, with more still to come. And one student alone received options on \$181,000. The funding is available depending on the student's choice of school.

— East Oregonian news editor Phil Wright contributed to this article.

Summit:

Continued from Page A1

Rather than any debate in Hermiston, the trio shared the spotlight on the second day of the conference and answered the same set of questions.

Why run for governor?

Kotek, speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives, 2013-22, spoke of her parents. They were immigrants, she said, who taught her values including thriftiness and giving back to society. The Democratic nominee also mentioned her sports background.

"I want to be your team captain," she said.

Having moved to the state in 1987, she fell in love with it right away, she said. She liked the look of Oregon, and loved the potential.

In the years that followed, she worked for the Oregon Food Bank. As such, she said, she traveled to all parts of the state and got to know people throughout.

Since then, working in the state House, she made an effort to identify and solve problems, she said.

Drazan, Oregon representative from Canby 2019-22, said she is motivated by values taught to her in her childhood.

The Republican nominee said she was taught in her youth that politicians mattered, but they frequently made things worse for their constituents.

When she started working in government, she said, she wanted to shoulder the burdens of other people. As she did so, she discovered that serving under Democratic rule was not altogether great.

"Single-party control has led to us being on the wrong course," she said.

She added she wants to restore balance, thereby returning government to the people.

"We have the opportunity for change," she said.

She said her opponents had their chance, but they are the ones who are responsible for getting us "to where we are" now.

Johnson served as an Oregon state senator 2005-21 and a state representative before that and ran as a Democrat. But her bid to take Mahonia Hall has her running an unaffiliated campaign.



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Oregon Democrat gubernatorial candidate Tina Kotek talks Friday, June 17, 2022, during the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Betsy Johnson, unaffiliated Oregon gubernatorial candidate, speaks to a crowd Friday, June 17, 2022, at the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.

"I'm going to be on your side," she said.

Johnson said Gov. Kate Brown has taken the state in the wrong direction, and voting for Kotek would be "validating the status quo," and that would make things even worse.

Johnson spoke of often finding herself at odds with her party and annoying her colleagues. She said Oregon needs more moderates in government, and she wants to be governor so she can employ ideas from both major parties.

What is there to do about the urban/rural divide?

Addressing the separation between people in bigger and smaller cities, Kotek praised the Economic Summit as "a good start" to solving the problem.

"It's nice to be back here in Hermiston," she said.

Kotek said having legislators and politicians visit places away from their homes helps them build relationships. And through those relationships, they can push forward on topics such

as wildfire recovery, which needs popular support.

Drazan said this election is giving rural people an opportunity for respect. In decisions, as with ones relating to COVID-19, state government has given the state a Portland-centric approach.

Johnson spoke of her own history with flying fellow legislators to Eastern Oregon.

"This is not a stop," she said.

By bringing people in government to this side of the state, she said, she is able to educate them on the values and needs here.

What about the pandemic and health care?

The candidates weighed in on the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic and what they might have done differently as governor.

Kotek said there are some important lessons to draw from the pandemic. There were good things about the response, she said. For instance, the state deserves

credit for organizing personal protective equipment. There were, however, problems, including communication, she said. Joblessness and people having trouble with rents were other trouble spots relating to the coronavirus.

Drazan said Oregon, under Brown, led with fear. According to Drazan, the governor told people that bad things would happen if they didn't do what they were told.

"I will lead with facts and not fear," she said.

She stated there will be wildfires and droughts and problems, but as governor she would empower local communities to do what is right for them and to solve their problems.

Johnson said Oregon should have trusted its people. The mandates were, she said, "heavy handed." Often, she said, decisions were made without the consult of affected people. Also, the system needs an "overhaul," she said, so we can know who is responsible for decisions and hold them accountable.

All three candidates praised Oregon's system of coordinated care organizations, though Drazan stated the system needed protection from becoming "a shadow of its former self."

How will you know you were a good governor?

For the final question, each candidate addressed what she wanted to accomplish and how they would know they were successful after being governor.

Kotek said she would like to be remembered for bringing people together to solve problems, including the need for more housing.

Drazan stated she wants to be the person who cleans up the "mess" Oregon is in now and keep people from wanting to leave.

Johnson said she wants to be the person who makes the state less divided and more unified.

Also, she said, she wants to solve homelessness throughout the state, reduce crime and make Oregon more affordable. She spoke of the state's need to address its housing supply problem and restore respect to business.

Johnson added she wants to restore the "maverick spirit" of Oregon. Bold, new leadership that seeks the middle of our political divide, she said, is key to rejuvenating the "Oregon mojo."

Beast:

Continued from Page A1

First up at West Point is cadet basic training. Paullus plans to "slay the beast," the euphemism for completing basic training. The six-week training ends with a 12-mile ruck march carrying 35-40 pounds of gear. Paullus went on practice marches on some back roads carrying her dad's ruck pack. Her father, Joshua Paullus, is a 30-year veteran of the Army National Guard.

It was her dad who got the idea of West Point lodged in Tatum's brain back in elementary school. When her older sister was considering different colleges, Joshua half jokingly pushed West Point. Her sister rejected the idea but Tatum tucked it into the back of her brain to reexamine later. In middle school, however, she rejected the idea of the military entirely.

"I went through a phase where I did not like the military at all because it took my dad away so much," she recalled. "Dad deployed for almost two years right after I was born. He deployed again when I was in kindergarten and came back when I was in first grade."

Then there was the summer and weekend trainings. Tatum blamed the Army.

When she connected with a group called Oregon Military Teen Panel, things changed. The group helps military youth connect, go through resiliency training and "talk about some of the stuff we go through at home." Tatum now is an officer with the national Teen Panel.

While researching possible colleges as a freshman, Paullus revisited the idea of West Point and mentioned it to Debbie McBee, a mentor with Pendleton High School's ASPIRE — Access to Student Assistance Programs In Reach of Everyone — program. McBee's son, Brian, attended West Point and McBee served as a local admissions person for West Point for 10 years.

McBee didn't immedi-

ately encourage Paullus.

"She immediately went into all of the hard things," Paullus said. "She asked, 'Are you ready for that?'"

McBee remembered wanting Paullus to consider all the implications before diving in.

"Some young people go after a dream because it has allure," she said. "West Point and other military academies are not like any other college experience. It's a whole other level. You can't leave campus for a pizza and beer. You give up a lot."

Paullus convinced McBee she was serious.

"She's been locked on this the whole way along," McBee said. "I can see her being one of the top people in her class."

McBee did some research in the West Point archives and said she believes Paullus is the first woman from Umatilla County accepted to West Point since it started admitting women in 1976.

Early on in the process, Paullus sought out West Point graduates and current cadets, especially female, to get a full measure of their experience.

Paullus, whose hair falls down to her lower back, won't have to get the military buzz cut required of male cadets. She said she feels for some of the guys who she has gotten to know over social media.

Paullus said she expects to miss her little brother, Cash, her dad and her mom, Heidi, who the Pendleton School District recently selected as the new assistant principal at Washington Elementary School.

As Paullus looks ahead, her plans resemble one of those choose-your-own-ending adventure books. She said she plans to double major in international affairs and Arabic with an internship with the CIA or FBI. After that, she identified three possible routes. If she chooses a military career, she hopes to do psychological operations, a part of special operations. If she doesn't choose a military career, she'd like to work for the CIA or maybe become a politician.

Before all that, she must slay the beast.

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