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## OUR VIEW

# Will changes to graduation requirements make things better?

Oregon's high school graduation rates may be moving in a better direction. But many minority students continue to struggle to graduate.

Oregon could target more support to minority students. It could change the graduation requirements.

The Oregon Department of Education last week released recommendations for changes to graduation requirements.

For some, it's going to look like Oregon is dumbing down. For others, Oregon is going to be making necessary changes to interrupt disparities in education.

Some testing would be gone, permanently, under the recommendations.

The proposal is to eliminate the requirement for students to take a test to demonstrate proficiency in math, reading and writing. Students would be required to continue to demonstrate those proficiencies in courses.

A test is viewed by some as an unnecessary barrier to graduation. Many states no longer require them. It is not clear tests helps students prepare for life after high school, the report says.

Next up, the math requirement would be changed.

The current math requirement is for one credit of algebra I and two credits beyond algebra I. The proposal keeps the three-credit requirement but eliminates the requirement for algebra I.

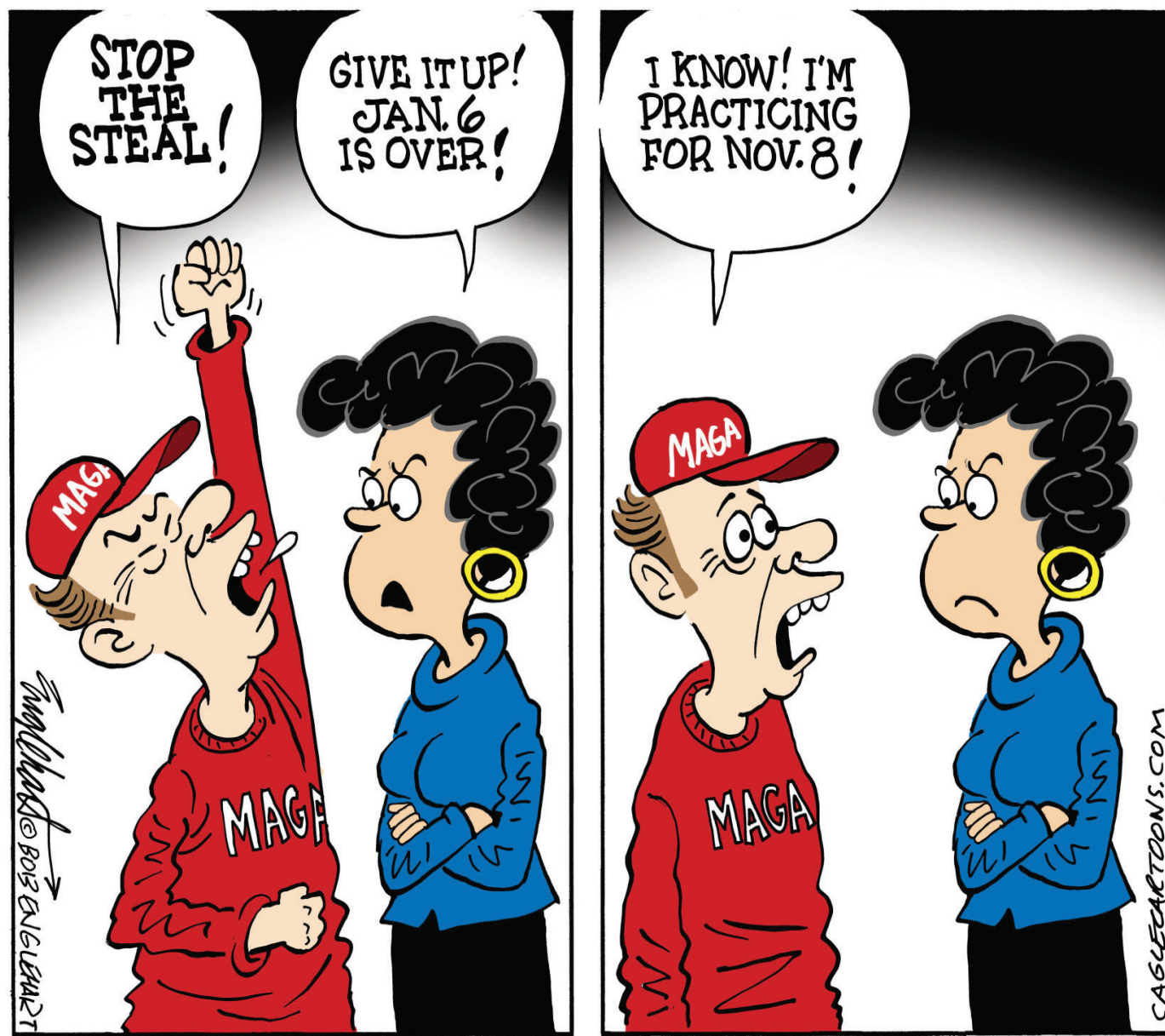
The reason given is it gives districts more flexibility. It may lead to math classes that more clearly reflect practical applications for math that students will encounter in their lives. Algebra I also is one of the most repeated courses by students. And that limits what other courses they can take in high school.

A new requirement that would be added has elements of financial literacy and future planning. It would be a one-credit course that would include things such as financial planning, interviewing and completing applications for jobs and post-secondary education.

Some students get plenty of support at home to do such things. Others do not.

There are more. And the report also has much more information comparing education in Oregon and other states and looking at the causes of disparities. You can read the report yourself here, [tinyurl.com/ORgraduation](http://tinyurl.com/ORgraduation).

What do you think? Tell your legislator. They are the ones who may be voting on some of these proposals.



## Oregon makes mockery of serving indigent defendants



DICK HUGHES  
OTHER VIEWS

Oregon seemingly makes a mockery of serving indigent defendants. The agency responsible for providing those lawyers has just blown up.

The firing of Steven Singer raises questions not only about justice in Oregon but also about complacency and change in Oregon governance. And about use and misuse of political power.

Singer was brought in from Louisiana last December to head the Oregon Office of Public Defense Services. The agency funds the network of criminal defense lawyers for individuals who cannot afford their own attorneys. That legal representation is guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment.

Oregon's system is so backed up that hundreds of low-income individuals face criminal charges yet lack lawyers. An American Bar Association report early this year suggested that Oregon had less than a third of the lawyers needed for indigent defendants. Low pay and high caseloads make recruiting those lawyers difficult.

The result: Guilty people go free if cases are dismissed for lack of defense counsel. Innocent people may be convicted if defense is poorly handled.

Singer arrived with a record of success, a pugnacious personality and plans to spend "about a year to basically listen, learn and gain an appreciation of the system before I embark on any long-term strategic planning and large-scale changes."

He didn't get that year. The Public Defense Services Commission fired Singer.

It wasn't exactly the same commis-

sion that had hired him last year.

There'd been some natural turnover. But the real change occurred this month when the commission deadlocked on ousting Singer. Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Martha Walters responded by firing all nine commission members, who are unpaid volunteers. Walters then appointed a new commission that included five of the previous nine.

Such drastic action usually is something only a governor does, such as when a displeased Gov. Kate Brown fired a majority of the Environmental Quality Commission in 2017.

Oregon has a unique — bizarre? — public defense system. The oddest part is not that the chief justice holds all power over the commission. That does raise questions about the commission's independence. But Oregon also is the only state that contracts out for all public defenders — through consortiums, nonprofits or independent attorneys and firms — instead of having some lawyers on the public payroll, as are district attorneys.

Everyone seems to agree the system is an underfunded mess. But they can't agree on the solution, let alone the direction. The commission hired a consultant last year but suspended that process in March. Singer had his own ideas, which didn't align with Walters'. In April, the legislative leadership, the governor and the chief justice announced they were convening a work group led by state Sen. Floyd Prozanski, D-Eugene, and Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, to develop short- and long-term reforms.

Singer apparently is one of those folks you love or hate. Many overworked, underpaid defense lawyers out in the field felt they finally had a champion in state government. But he'd alienated the chief justice; key legislators, who determine the agency's budget; some commission members, including chair Per Ramfjord; some staff

members; and others.

By this month, Singer had few remnants of goodwill left. However, no one deserves to wear the cloak of righteousness in this sordid saga.

I'm left wondering, how the heck did Singer get hired in the first place? He contends Oregon's situation was far worse than he realized when he took the job. If so, that's on both him and the commission.

How much change did commissioners want and were willing to tolerate? In Singer, they hired a change agent, a disrupter. How deep was their soul-searching before employing him? It strikes me that people say they want profound change until that change doesn't fit their preconceptions.

He was proud of his bulldog approach — some might say "bullheaded" — and his being fired in Louisiana should not necessarily have disqualified him. Still, Oregon is not Louisiana. Salem is not Baton Rouge. The failure of the Singer-commission marriage shows the commissioners inadequately researched him, his combative style and how he would fit here. How did they prepare him for working within the Oregon political system, and they with him?

Oregon's landscape is littered with appointees who succeeded elsewhere but floundered here. One was Rudy Crew, whom Gov. John Kitzhaber brought in as Oregon's first chief education officer. He lasted one year during 2012-13. Kitzhaber at least recognized that Crew would be a potentially high-risk, high-gain personage.

It's not that homegrown is always the answer or even the preferred answer. Outsiders bring new ideas, new ways, new energy. But don't ignore the challenges. And be honest about how much change will be accepted.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

## YOUR VIEWS

### Idaho Power's B2H would create unnecessary problems

"A clever person solves a problem. A wise person avoids it." — Albert Einstein

Idaho Power Co.'s proposed B2H power line is outdated and creates problems we'd be wise to avoid.

The B2H power line offers no benefits to Oregonians, only many burdens. We would endure permanent problems: damage and defacement to our hills, views, plants and wildlife. While there

are many reasons not to build B2H, the most compelling to me is the increased risk of wildfire. Power lines are a common cause of fires.

At 6 a.m. on Nov. 8, 2018, a power line started the Camp Fire 8 miles from Paradise, California. One hour later, the fire ripped through the town of 26,000 people. That fire killed 86 people, scorched 155,000 acres and destroyed 19,000 buildings. Idaho Power wants to put B2H within a mile or 2 of La Grande. Did I mention that La Grande is far drier? We get about 18 inches of rain yearly, while Paradise receives 60. Recent advances in technology,

changes in economic factors and concerns about hacking, terrorism and our planet's health make long-distance power lines outdated. Local power production — such as Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative's community solar project near La Grande — is safer and more secure.

Idaho Power's cleverness will cause unnecessary destruction and risks to Eastern Oregonians. Let's be wise and avoid this project. Show your disapproval of this bad idea. Visit [www.stopb2h.org](http://www.stopb2h.org) for more information.

John Winters  
La Grande

### EDITORIALS

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### SEND LETTERS TO:

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