

County schools graduate students on time

By S.F. Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Recent statistics released by the U.S. Department of Education show the state of Oregon at the bottom of the nation's heap in graduating high school students on time. A mere 69 percent of Oregon's high school students don their cap and gown in a four-year period.

Not so in Wallowa County, where all three high schools graduate over 90 percent of their students in the specified time.

Rhonda Shirley, superintendent of Joseph Charter School, says her school graduated 95.45 percent of its students on time, with only one student missing the mark during the 2014 school year.

Chronic absenteeism is one reason given for Oregon's low graduation marks, and Shirley said that Joseph's small size allows the school to commu-

nicate with parents to make sure the student attends classes. "We know our kids here, whereas I think it might be tougher to track them down in a bigger school," Shirley said.

Low income, another reason cited by state officials for the low graduation numbers, doesn't appear to derail students quite so easily in Wallowa County, which has the second-lowest income average in the state.

Shirley again attributed this to small school size. "We do one-on-one conferences with kids and their parents to see if we can put a plan together for anyone falling behind. It's usually successful," Shirley said.

When school staff members become aware of a student contemplating dropping out, the staff immediately goes into action to convince the student to stay in school. "Sometimes we need to modify their schedule if they're feeling overwhelmed," Shirley said.



Rob Ruth/Chieftain

Schools in Wallowa County perform well above the state average in on-time graduation.

She added that JCS also offers after-school tutoring programs that parents greatly support.

Although all Wallowa County schools pursue four-day school weeks, the classroom hours actually surpass state requirements for each level of student.

Enterprise School District Superintendent Brad Royse said Enterprise High School boasts a 97 percent on-time graduation rate. Like Shirley,

Royse credits the school's size for keeping the levels up. "The beauty of small schools is that kids have an opportunity to participate. About 84 percent of our kids participate in extracurricular activities," Royse said.

Students who participate in sports, drama, FFA and FCCLA are less likely to call it quits.

"From my perspective, your faculty know you. You're not a number. The faculty show in-

terest in those kids, and I think those kids are critical to retention," Royse said. He added that as a former large school administrator, larger schools do not have the time for personalized student attention.

If the school notices a child with excessive absences, the staff and administration reaches out through letters, phone calls and home visits to get the student on track. "When that teacher knows that kid's name and his parents, it makes a significant impact," Royse said. He added that children out and about during the school day face likely recognition from an adult who knows them.

Wallowa High School currently boasts a 100-percent graduation rate. Like the county's other superintendents, Bret Uptmor credited the school's small size and personalized education as factors in their success.

Uptmor did not see absenteeism or poverty as major contributing factors in his school's graduation rate although he acknowledged using the law on occasion for

chronic absentees.

Uptmor credited a number of factors that can help the school staff recognize a struggling student. "The reality is every student is an individual and we need to identify when a student is struggling. Staff, students, parents, administration and community all play a big role in providing key pieces of information about a student's success."

If the staff or Uptmor know a student is thinking about dropping out, the school schedules a meeting with the parents to get the student pointed on a path of success. He also said that although tight budgets limit the amount of electives offered, the school tries to make solid offerings with the possibility of more offerings if budgets increase in the future.

Uptmor saw the key to overall student graduation success as a team effort rather than hinging on any one facet of education. "The piece that is important is that all the partners are working together to give the student the tools to make it to the end," Uptmor said.

Shirley assesses wind damage at JCS

By Stephen Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain

The blustering winds of

Feb. 6 that wreaked havoc throughout Wallowa County took a heavy toll at Joseph Charter School, where more

is now known about the damage.

A large tree next to the school fell onto the roof, causing gutter damage. The process of removing the tree caused a broken window in the office of JCS Superintendent Rhonda Shirley.

Winds also blew out two windows of the school's music room, breaking overhead lights as well as scattering shards of glass and sheets of paper throughout the room. School employees quickly patched the two windows with plywood to avoid further damage.

Shirley said the winds

also wrapped a newer set of bleachers from the football field around the school building. Shirley said those bleachers were a total loss. The door to the bus shed sustained irreparable damage and an old greenhouse on the school grounds had plastic blown off the top.

The wind also blew away a large amount of insulation from the construction site of the new gym.

Shirley said the school had insurance coverage for the damage.

"We just felt fortunate the school didn't suffer more losses," she said.

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