

Workers:

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up 26% of the overall workforce. That's up nearly 4% from its 2010 numbers.

As well, the population of older workers has started declining since 2017, when it reached its peak, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The rate at which the baby boomer generation has been retiring is accelerating, according to Pew Research Center. From 2019 to 2020, approximately 28.6 million baby boomers — those born between 1946 and 1964 — retired; a 3.2 million uptick from 2019. On average, that number had previously been increasing by around two million retirees per year.

The impact

“One of the other factors is that boomers are retiring at an enormous rate, which is, in a way, sucking everybody up the the corporate ladder or corporate world,” said Matt Scarfo, a Union County commissioner and



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Cindy Ellis, co-owner of Heavenly's Restaurant in Enterprise, greets customers through the take-out window Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. At times, take-out has been the only way Heavenly's could serve, partially due to the lack of employees to man the inside seating.

owner of Long Branch and Benchwarmer's Pub & Grill in La Grande. “Everyone's getting the bump up to those higher positions, if they did have them, and so it's causing a vacuum down to the X, Y, Z generation.”

On the ground, restaurants and service industries reported having to hire much younger staff than in normal years, though the restaurant industry has historically been staffed by younger workers and those looking for part-time work, and the data from the U.S.

Census Bureau and Oregon Employment Department indicate there hasn't been any significant changes in the employment level for those under the age of 18.

Angelica Zurita, who with her husband, Jose Lopez, owns the La Laguna

Family Mexican Restaurants in Enterprise and Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, said they employ about 15 people at the three establishments.

During the summer tourist season, they were fortunate to find college students who were eager to work. But now, as the students return to campus, finding reliable help is a problem.

“They really don't want a job,” Zurita said of some of the locals who have applied. “They show up drunk, call in sick, don't show up at all or they show up late.”

Still, as the tourist season ends, she's optimistic the restaurants and saloon will manage.

“It's slowing down to where I think we've got it covered,” she said.

The trades, too, are having a tough time finding workers. Jared Hillock, manager and co-owner of Hillcock Electric, said the biggest problem is a lack of qualified electricians around.

“There are just not enough people in the trades right now,” he said. “I think it's important we get kids

in trades and not preach so much college.”

He said a starting electrician right out of high school — after a four-year apprenticeship — can make \$32 an hour, with benefits.

“We're trying to push more kids think about trades,” he said. “You can make a good family wage right out of high school.”

He does have an opening for a counter person, which he's not gotten many adequate applications for.

“We get a lot of random resumes dropped off, which guess is people trying satisfy job-search requirements,” Hillock said.

Renaissance Design, Fabrication & Powder Coating, which opened in May in Joseph, has had numerous well-paying positions available but that still are not filled, owner Rick LaFave said.

“I'm still trying to hire three or four more welders,” LaFave said. “People don't want to work, I guess. ... I've talked to several people who've put feelers out, but I'm not getting people who want to go to work.”

Braden:

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mental health situation.

“The school counselor is on the front line and helping to get the kid to the right place for their needs,” he said.

Coming home

The brother of former Joseph city Administrator/Recorder Larry Braden, Landon and his wife, the former Vanessa Johnson, are both alumni of Joseph High School from the early 2000s. They have three children, ranging in age from 5 to 10, and numerous family members in the area, including both sets of their parents.

“It's great for our kids to grow up with cousins around and going to the same school,” he said. “My wife and I have never had the support of our family around. ... It's great — our kids having cousins in their classrooms, something they haven't experienced before. We're related to lots of folks. I'm finding new relatives all the time. It's a great place to raise a family and a great community to be a part of.”

He even reconnected with former teachers of his.

“We got to the point where the desire to raise our kids in the same community where we grew up became bigger and bigger and bigger every year,” he said. “Then the opportunity came up. I saw the job posting at Enterprise High School. (EHS Principal) Blake Carlsen was my fourth-grade teacher, so I called him up and asked about the job. He said, ‘You're not interested, are you?’ I said I might be.”

So he interviewed and was offered the job.

“It was the right time for us,” Braden said.

Many hats

Braden knows that as a counselor, he has to reach out to kids who may have problems.

“Especially in a small

school, you're going to wear several different hats,” he said. “But the bigger piece is helping kids who struggle with social and emotional needs that aren't being met somewhere.”

The counselor must reach out and not expect kids to just come on their own.

“The work starts way before they need you,” he said. “You're building relationships and connecting with kids on their best days, on good days. So when they have a bad day, they have that comfort relationship and want to come talk to you.”

One of those “extra hats” he's wearing at present is that of acting principal for Enterprise Elementary School. In fact, he virtually traded jobs with former Principal Erika Pinkerton — who also was district superintendent — and now holds his former job as director of student services with the La Grande School District.

As principal, he's in charge of discipline, though he doesn't look upon that role in a punitive sense.

“My approach to that was what I call ‘restorative justice,’ so rather than a disciplinarian assigning a punishment, I started with, ‘What do I want the kid to learn?’ and then work backwards to how I'm going to help him learn,” he said.

“For example, we caught some kids vaping in the bathroom (in La Grande). The counselor at the time had them take a class on the damaging effects of the vapors that come out of their vape pens and the long-term consequences of that. Then they wrote a paper to me on what they learned and then also to potentially the victims of that as a victim incident, meaning, let's say that while they were in the bathroom, they vandalized a stall. What they probably don't think of is how is that going to affect the custodian. Is it fair I'm creating this extra work for them? ... So we'd have them write a letter to the custodian

apologizing and explaining what they learned.”

He said they also had the offending kids clean up any damage done.

“In La Grande, chewing gum was a major issue. With 500-600 kids in a building, gum ended up everywhere,” he said. “We had a pretty strict no-gum policy.”

One time he had a kid he'd talked to several times.

“He just kept it up. So I talked to his parents and I talked to the custodian and the next time he did it, I had him scrape off the bottom of all the tables in the cafeteria,” he said. “That was the last time I ever had to write him up for chewing gum.”

First month

Braden's first month at Enterprise has come with a few additions, he said.

Amy Stangel, the social-emotional prevention coordinator, also fulfills the counselor role in the elementary school, educating kids on how to express their emotions and successfully convey their frustrations.

Dakota Hull is the supervisor of K-12 online learning and the truancy officer for the district. Braden works with both.

“With them together, we are developing a whole new behavior system for Enterprise Elementary,” he said. “It's going to be less punitive and more base on encouraging, building and rewarding positive behavior.”

Addressing COVID regulations

As principal, Braden is required to see that students and staff comply with

state regulations requiring face masks and — for adults — vaccines. But he understands some may object to the state mandates.

“Whether or not you believe in the masks, our staff accepts that if we want to keep kids in our building, we've got to wear the masks,” he said.

The vaccine issue can be more complex, he said.

“We have teachers in both camps, of willing to be vaccinated or not,” he said. “But at the end of the day, I want to see teachers in classrooms and kids in seats learning. Whatever we need to do to make that happen, we need to do it. I think that viewpoint is not uncommon among the staff here.”



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