

# Oregon's on-time graduation rates among the worst

## EDUCATION continued from front page

the rate was 71.9 percent for AI/AN students and 84.1 percent overall.

Approximately 25 percent of students in the Willamina School District are Grand Ronde Tribal members.

Oregon's on-time graduation rates are among the worst in the country at 10 percent below the national average and among the five worst states for five years in a row, according to the Secretary of State's research.

Willamina School District Superintendent Carrie Zimbrick said that the 2015-16 rates are an anomaly locally. In 2013-14, 66.7 percent of AI/AN earned a diploma within four years, compared with 51.6 statewide, and that number bumped up to 70 percent versus 53.5 percent statewide in 2014-15.

"However, these numbers are still low and we are not satisfied with average. We are tracking several key performance indicators in an effort to support our students at the greatest risk for not graduating," Zimbrick said. "We track attendance, with a goal to have students attend 90 percent of the time. We track behavior, with a goal of no more than three office referrals or suspensions, and finally we track course performance."

The state Department of Education's statistics also are more positive, with an 83 percent overall completion rate at Willamina High for that same year and a 100 percent AI/AN completion rate. "Completion" includes students who earned a regular, modified, extended or adult high school diploma, or completed a GED within five years of entering high school.

During a Wednesday, Jan. 10, presentation by the Tribal Youth Education Department, it was noted that Willamina High is "consistently overachieving" compared to AI/AN populations in similar districts statewide.

## Barriers to on-time graduation

A major barrier to on-time graduation faced by the Willamina School District is that 95 percent of its students are considered economically disadvantaged, which can result in multiple challenges that affect learning and graduating on time, with the biggest one being regular school attendance. The district has one of the highest chronic absenteeism rates in the state.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing 10 percent or more of scheduled school days.

As a result, the district was a recipient of the statewide Tribal Attendance Pilot Project, which was designed to strengthen the links between Tribes and schools that serve enrolled Tribal members.

The Oregon Legislature allotted \$1.5 million and the state Department of Education distributed the funding to nine school districts that serve students who are enrolled in a Tribe with each district receiving \$150,000 for the 2016-17 school year. Those school districts also

are receiving the same amount of money to be used during this school year and in 2018-19.

"Addressing that issue comes first," Zimbrick said. "This (grant) allowed us to hire a family support advocate, tasked with building relationships with families to improve school attendance. We targeted the elementary school, and we saw a 10-percent improvement in attendance at the K to sixth-grade level. We have designated a person to replicate this program at the (middle and high school) grade levels."



Leslie Riggs

Zimbrick said the district has seen vast improvement in attendance during the first four months of school in the program's second year. "The priority of the family advocate is to work with families to overcome barriers that impact attendance," Zimbrick said. "We offer a lot of student incentives and some family ones as well. TAPP has also provided us with some specialized training to combat chronic absenteeism."

In an Oct. 1, 2017, *Smoke Signals* story about the program, it noted that the percentage of Native American students who were chronically absent in Willamina decreased in all three schools – elementary, middle and high.

At the elementary school, the percentage dropped from 43.22 percent in 2015-16 to 36.51 percent in 2016-17. The middle school saw a smaller decrease from 45.45 percent to 42.42 percent while the high school dropped more than 7 percentage points from 55.36 percent to 48.28 percent.

The effort within the Willamina School District to get Native American students to school appears to be having a spillover effect. Chronic absenteeism rates for other students also dropped in all three schools, most notably at the middle school where the rate plummeted from 50.51 percent to 33.33 percent.

"By middle school, chronic absence is one of the leading indicators of dropping out," Zimbrick said. "(It) is a better predictor of ninth-grade dropout than the actual grades a student receives in the eighth grade."

During the Jan. 10 Youth Education presentation, poverty, child abuse/neglect, substance abuse, general violence/crime, mental health, family history and lack of knowledge regarding resources were all listed as potential barriers to academic success.

Tribal Education Department Manager Leslie Riggs said that while an emphasis on graduating high school is important, students often need to find their "why" to do so. That is where education programs such as college and business tours, as well as tutoring and mentoring, come into play.

"Some of these students we have been working with since sixth grade and now they are getting ready to

graduate," Riggs said.

Youth Education staff members partner with the school district through monthly leadership meetings, parent/teacher conference attendance, registration assistance, academic advising and attending Individual Education Plan meetings.

One Grand Ronde Tribal member who has utilized the tutoring program is 19-year-old Lily Baker. She first sought help two years ago when math and history became overwhelming.

"Here, they can explain it different ways," she said. "In school, it is only explained one way."

That help has gone a long way: When Baker first approached Youth Education for tutoring, she was barely passing, despite regular class attendance. Now, her grades are mostly As and Bs.

"I feel good about going to school now because I understand things," Baker said.

She is on track to graduate this May. Although Baker isn't sure what she wants to do after high school, some ideas include becoming a licensed massage therapist or activity director for an assisted living facility.

She encourages struggling Native American students to try more than one option before giving up on school.

"If asking your teacher doesn't help, ask someone else," she said.

Riggs said that the Tribe has had a lot of success with its members graduating high school, but that doesn't necessarily equal being prepared for life.

"We spend lots of time taking them to see colleges, universities or trades they can do after high school," he said. "They learn the tools they

will need to have in high school to do that. We also have very real conversations with them. If there is a youth who wants to be a veterinarian, but is failing math, we ask if that is something they can change."

He said that due to Grand Ronde being in a rural area, it can have a negative effect on what youth believe they can accomplish.

"A college campus to a student from Willamina can seem pretty daunting," Riggs said. "But a lot of us who work here are products of these post-high school programs that are offered for Tribal members. We advise students that if they feel overwhelmed, to start out with a few classes and dip their toes in, just see what it is like. The last thing we want to do is set someone up for failure."

He also said that rural areas often lack the employment opportunities that urban and suburban areas possess.

"We have three main employers here: The Tribe, the casino and the federal prison (in Sheridan)," Riggs said. "I just think there is a lot of lack of awareness. Also, people want to stay here. They don't want to leave. Statistically, most Tribal members utilizing the post-high school education programs are those who do not live locally."

He said the Education Department is invested in helping to change that.

"We have home visitors who go into the homes and assist with education or parenting issues," he said. "It is never too early to start. In our kindergarten through fifth-grade program, we are always talking about what you can do with your future and remind them that any Tribal member who wants to further their education can do so." ■



## Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde 2018 Transit Plan Community Workshop and Dinner

Please join the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde at a community workshop to help create a new Transit Plan for our community.

- Discuss the transportation needs, gaps in transit service, and mobility challenges of Tribal and Grand Ronde community members, especially seniors and people with disabilities.
- Identify the public transportation resources (both fixed route and special services) currently available in this community.
- Identify the geographic, coordination and structural barriers to addressing these needs and strategies and solutions that can overcome those barriers.

Workshop invitees include Tribal members, other Grand Ronde community members, transportation providers, community organizations, and human and health service agencies to provide a diverse representation of services and geographies. The outcome of this workshop will guide the development of this new plan. This document will serve as the basis and rationale for potential future applications for federal and state transit funding. The time, date, and location of the workshop are below – dinner will be served at 5:30 p.m.

Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018 from 5:30 to 7 p.m.

Community Center

9615 Grand Ronde Road, Grand Ronde, OR 97347

Please plan to arrive 15 minutes before the workshop begins and stay until the end.



For more information or to provide input on the Transit Plan, please contact Kim Rogers at [kim.rogers@grandronde.org](mailto:kim.rogers@grandronde.org) or at 503-879-2250.