

**Education** from 1A

"You only have to use equipment like chainsaws, yarders, skidders, cats," said Jesse. Meanwhile, at the table

across from them, classmate Makayla Bender says she wants to be a veterinarian.

While it may be too early for these children to pave out the story of their lives, their interests are reflective of the diver-

sity needed in the workforce, and these interests are nurtured through their education opportunities. Education opportunities, in turn, are nurtured by the strength of a community's economy and workforce.

**"BALLOT MEASURE 5"**

"We go back 20 years ago, with the tail end of the heyday of the timber industry. There was a great support system around that," Andy Grzeskowiak said.

As the superintendent of the Siuslaw School District, he is particularly keen on discovering why he's had issues with funding the schools he oversees, and what it will take to fix them.

Back in the day, the high schools and the lumber industry held a symbiotic relationship, due in large part to how the mills were run.

"Not everybody worked in the woods or the mills directly," Grzeskowiak said. "You had all these other trades, some of which were trained from inside the system. Service engineers within the mills made sure the mill ran. And then you had people that were trained from the outside who could come in and run the mill to make sure operations could run well."

There were mechanics, welders, general laborers — almost every trade had some sort of representation in the mills, and the mills got many of these workers directly from the high schools.

"You had kids that would come in and start off in entry level jobs," Grzeskowiak said. "They would work part time and they would do some professional technical training. And they would become the welders for the mill, or they would start off as a load operator and then wind up going to Lane Community College and become a diesel mechanic. And then they're a mechanic for that facility."

While the mills were slowly going out of business, the tech-

nical careers that the students learned in the mills kept them in the community. Florence was building its retirement infrastructure. Homes and businesses were going up.

Then, in 1990, the system began to crash. That was the year Ballot Measure 5, an amendment to the Oregon Constitution, decreased the rates of property taxes in Oregon.

Before the change, schools were funded by property taxes, but the public voted for a drastic cut in taxes. Before Measure 5, \$19.64 was charged for every \$1,000 a house was worth. After the measure came into full effect, \$5 for every \$1,000 was taxed. In its place, income tax was used as the primary funder of schools.

Suddenly, "volatility" became the buzzword for those looking to fund schools.

"Income tax is the most volatile tax there is," Grzeskowiak said. "Once we started linking state funding to that, that's when things got dicey."

It got dicey for the entire state of Oregon. Programs were cut, teachers fired. Vocational programs and the arts were slashed. While bond measures and grants were used to offset some of the shortfall, they were, by their very nature, volatile. They were also project specific.

By the year 2000, the Quality Education Commission was set up to see how much money the schools needed to keep going. As it turned out, they needed a lot.

In response to the commission, Measure 1 was passed in 2001. This required the legislature to fund school quality goals, issue reports and establish equalization grants. Except it didn't really do those things. Multiple reports were issued, but funding rarely made it to the schools.

As programs continued to be cut, the Great Recession of 2008 hit. Construction in the Siuslaw region tanked, and the skilled workers ended up leaving the community. Siuslaw High School, which was dependent on income tax, was at a crossroads: Keep the technical vocational training, or aim for four-year colleges?

"We had a change of focus away from technical education to more of a college-focused track," Grzeskowiak said. "We had this push for college readiness, and at the same time we were reducing funds overall. Things that were considered to be electives were in the career fields. Programs in mechanics and welding, printmaking and photography, all started getting reduced. That's where we also start seeing things in art and PE that were being considered non-essential."

Teachers who weren't laid off began instruction geared to college entrance exams, with the goal of sending students out to four-year institutions, leaving the Siuslaw region bereft of young, trade-oriented professionals.

This had been a national trend for years, with blue-collar work often being devalued in the face of more "prestigious" career goals. However, the push hurt a lot of students.

"The idea was, everybody was going to become a scientist, an engineer or a mathematician," Grzeskowiak said. "We're going to get everybody to go to college because it's a good thing. And then the floodgates opened and everybody was going to college."

The finances hit the millennial generation the hardest. According to a 2017 Forbes article, the average American household with student debt owes about \$49,000. Graduates in their 20s spend, on average, \$350 a month just on student loans.

But the jobs that the college graduates are getting aren't necessarily paying for those student loans. The same Forbes article states that the average "entry-level" job was worth about \$50,000 a year for new graduates. They can expect their wages being garnished 10 percent for roughly 10 to 12 years after they graduate, just to pay off the student loan.

And that's if they get a job. "Having a university degree isn't a guarantee for employment," Grzeskowiak pointed out.

In 2016, Marketwatch reported that 45 percent of college graduates worked in "non-college jobs," which is defined as a position in which fewer

than 50 percent of the workers in that job need a bachelor's degree. Low-skilled jobs, including baristas, bartenders and cashiers, accounted for 19.3 percent of underemployed graduates.

The "four-year" university is taking a lot longer to finish as well. In 2016, the National Student Clearinghouse reported that students take five to six years to actually finish a degree, and go to multiple institutions to do it.

While budgetary concerns are a major drive for this, Grzeskowiak points out another problem in the "four-year" push.

"We thought we were going to solve all of our problems by sending everyone into the tech industry," he said. "There was this fantasy piece within computers that everybody was going to be a video game programmer. If you could do it and do it well, you could make a lot of money at it — but it's like every other field. Every field has superstars in it, and that's always a draw. You always have that romantic tinge to it. 'Hey, be a video game designer and make all this money.'"

But, not everybody can be a videogame designer. According to a CNN report, there are only 520,800 jobs video game jobs worldwide. "With competition in the game space so fierce, there's no room for mistakes," the report said.

"Trying to get a 16-year-old kid to try and figure out what they want to do and jump to college is a tough thing to do," Grzeskowiak said. "There is some value in taking some time, maybe taking a year or two, and then going to school. And that's probably part of the downfall of the push to get to college right out of high school. We funneled everybody into one path and into one timeline. And not everybody falls lock-step into that age and development."

The push for college racked up debt for those who went. To pay for that, many millennials moved back into their parent's homes in retirement communities like the Siuslaw region. However, some don't have the skills that the region requires to enter the workforce.

This is where Russ Pierson, dean of Lane Community College (LCC) Florence Center, comes in.

**"PLEASE DO SOMETHING"**

To Pierson, LCC Florence is a lifeblood to the community. He found this out on his first day on the job back on 2015.

"Many members of the board of education were here for a listen session," he said. "They were going around from community to community, talking to folks about the college, its direction and its importance to the community. Florence had as many people as the rest

See **EDUCATION 10A**

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