

# Education is the challenge for this Legislature

Every child in Oregon deserves an excellent education — regardless of where the student lives or attends school, regardless of whether the student comes from a well-to-do family or an impoverished one, regardless of academic ability and regardless of ethnicity or race or background.

The recent Department of Education report on graduation rates shows that is not the case in Oregon. But another report from the Legislature's Joint Committee on Student Success provides a path forward.

Across Oregon, high school graduation rates increased by 2 percentage points last year to almost 79 percent.

The improvement is welcome news, but it remains deeply concerning that one-fifth of public high school students fail to graduate within four years.

There also are vast variations among demographic groups. The graduation rate was 82 percent for girls but 75.6 percent for boys. Graduation rates generally were lower for students of color but higher for former English language learners. Only 54 percent of homeless students graduated within four years of high school.

As members of the Student Success committee said, the public has had enough. Oregon has been grappling with these issues for decades, with too little progress.

Insufficient funding has been a major obstacle, especially since voters' passage of Measure 5 in 1990 put the onus on state government to fund public schools. But money is not the only issue. It's how the money is spent.

On the one hand, the collaborative approach espoused by the nonprofit, nonpartisan Chalkboard Project has achieved profound academic gains and higher staff morale in participating school districts. On the other hand, the state's recent audit report on Portland Public Schools shows "how a school district should not operate," according to Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner.

The bipartisan Student

Success committee has abundant ideas for reforms — excellent ideas — but with a combined price tag of well over \$3 billion. Not everything can be done.

The Legislature will significantly increase education spending. But PERS' unfunded actuarial liability will consume a huge chunk of any additional money earmarked for reducing class sizes, extending the school year or making other improvements. The majority Democrats and Gov. Kate Brown must face up to their responsibility to rein in public pension costs, instead of wringing their hands over court decisions that overturned past reforms.

School districts must accept that additional funding will come with requirements for accountability in how that money is used. Unlike previous political endeavors that chased the educational flavor of the day, the Student Success committee based its recommendations on reality. Lawmakers visited more than 50 schools — from the coast to eastern and southern Oregon — and talked with hundreds of students, staff members, parents, business people, civic leaders and others.

Committee members are working on determining which proposals would achieve the greatest return on investment and how to pay for them. Their top priorities include the importance of early childhood education and the drastic need for more school counselors, mental health therapists and other behavioral health services — throughout the state.

In their letter submitting the Student Success report, the committee's Democratic and Republican leaders wrote: "A student's achievement should be a result of their own efforts, not their parents' income or their race, ethnicity, or ZIP code. Unfortunately, factors entirely outside of a young person's control too often determine their access to a high-quality education. Oregon's students deserve a public education system that sets them up for success."

That is the challenge for the 2019 Legislature. That is the challenge for Oregon.



## FARMER'S FATE

# Boy Mom: Messy, blessed life

I heard it before I could see it. Water poured like Niagara Falls over the edge of the toilet bowl.

I paused in the doorway, unsure what to do first. About that moment, the water reached the tips of my boots. I swiped at the "pretty towels" — the ones usually reserved for just looking at — and confined the flood of water to the bathroom.

"What wrong toilet, Mommy?" Parker, my 2-year-old, asked with wide blue eyes.

The heaping pile of wadded toilet paper rose above the bowl like whipped cream on hot cocoa while the cardboard tube floated on the floor.

"You used too much toilet paper," I answered sharply. This wasn't the first time this had happened — or the second, or third. It was becoming a frequent occurrence — weekly, if not daily.

"Why toilet bwocken, Mommy?" he asked, just as innocently as before.

"Because you put too much toilet paper in it," I sighed with exasperation — more concerned with the job at hand than answering his ever-repeating question.

As he asked yet again, Keagan, my 9-year-old, poked his head around the corner. "It's like when you cram your mouth full of cook-



Brianna Walker

ies," he explained. "Your mouth is so full you can't get them down your throat. It's like that with the toilet."

I stopped plunging for a minute so I could watch this conversation. My 2-year-old looked up at his brother and was silent a moment as he seemed to process the simile. Then he wrinkled up his little nose. "That gwoos, Keagan!" he responded animatedly. "Parker not eat toilet paper!"

Keagan responded with more patience than I had while he repeated his analogy. Again, Parker shook his head with a look of disgust. "Gwoos, Keagan! Parker not put cookies in the toilet!"

The corners of my lips were twitching in a smile. Friends had told me that being a mom of boys would consist of cleaning pee off the toilet seat and listening to giggles over body functions. What they didn't tell me is that those same boys (my husband included) would take me right to the brink of insanity, then melt my heart with a sweet kiss — and a perfectly timed fart.

"You're going to miss this," I whispered to myself, taking a mental picture of this moment in time:

my oldest standing in the bathroom doorway of the wet bathroom floor, my youngest in the hallway with a golf club, the toilet plunger finally starting to make progress — wait, a golf club? I swung my head back to the hallway in time to see my oldest duck as a plastic ball zinged through the air and brushed my neck as it landed in the bathtub.

"No head shots!" I hollered out the door. "Body shots only!" My patience was once again gone.

"Sorry 'bout that, Mommy," Parker said, with just the right amount of surprise and apology in his little voice.

I smiled. I really will miss the rocks in the dryer, tractor toys in the fridge, little muddy, rubber boot tracks on my freshly mopped floors, empty rolls of tape next to "fixed" ladders, chairs and cupboard doors.

While pregnant, I envisioned myself to be a Pinterest mother of blonde, book-loving, tractor-driving girls. Well, it turns out I'm more of an Amazon Prime mom of crazy, messy, loud, smelly, emotionally unstable, frustrating, boys. And I wouldn't want it any other way. Unless I sit on a wet toilet seat — then I have momentary visions of Pinterest.

*Brianna Walker occasionally writes about the Farmer's Fate for the Blue Mountain Eagle.*

## GUEST COMMENT

# Improving Oregon cougar management

By Jim Akenson  
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

The fatal cougar attack on a hiker in the Mount Hood National Forest last year was a tragic thing.

Evidence evaluation indicated the cougar was a female in good health. Is this a surprise? Not really. Cougar numbers are at all-time highs for our state, and the distribution of these cats encompasses the entire state. What has accounted for this cougar population expansion from an estimation of less than 3,000 in the mid-1990s to well over 6,000 today? Some of the answer is biological, some is social and much is connected to management capabilities and practices. We need to find a way to return to this socio-biological balance, and looking to the recent past might just be the best bet — back to a time when hound hunting was a legal and effective management tool in Oregon.

What are the consequences of there being double the number of cougars in Oregon? These effects are best described as alarming and pattern changing. One such pattern is for prey animals, specifically deer, relocating to human development areas to avoid a higher predation risk. This relocation is also drawing in cougars that will go where the next meal can be found. Many hunters and state wildlife managers report that deer are now less abundant in the wilder mountain, high desert and canyon regions of our state. Meanwhile, Oregon cities are wrestling with the number of deer inhabiting city limits, and cougars are showing up in backyards and schoolyards.

As cougars become more comfortable in human-altered landscapes, the probability of negative encoun-



Jim Akenson

ters with humans, as well as pets and livestock, increases.

So, what is the solution? Biologically, it is plain and simple: more intensive cougar management through various hunting techniques. With an estimated population of 6,400 cougars, and roughly 14,000 people hunting cougars and harvesting from 250 to 300 cats per year, this only equals a harvest rate of 4 percent, which is not enough to even flatten the ever-rising cougar population curve.

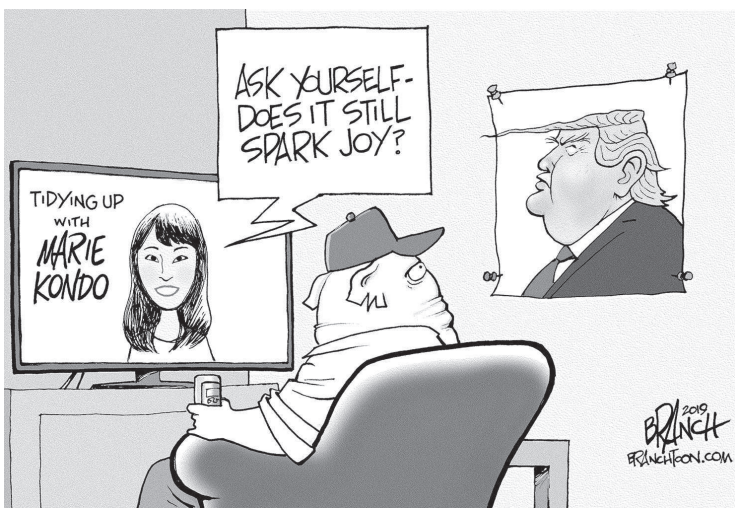
Reducing human threat, increasing deer and elk survival and bringing a cougar population back in balance with other interests in our state will require increased management action and efficiency. According to the 2017 Oregon Cougar Management Plan, the success rate for 2016 cougar hunters was 1.9 percent, with 13,879 people reporting that they did hunt cougars. Contrast that with 1994 data, the last year that dogs were allowed in conservatively controlled, limited-entry cougar hunting, showing 358 people hunted cougars and harvested 144 for a success rate of 40.2 percent. Bottom line: Hunting efficiency with dogs is dramatically higher and provides wildlife managers a reliable tool for maintaining the cougar population within its management objectives.

Oregon's cougar management and record keeping are divided into six zones, each of which is assigned a desired harvest quota to keep the population in balance with the varied activities of all Oregonians. Employing the current limited management methods, only one of the six zones

has met the harvest quota in recent years. A criterion for quota establishment is complaint frequency. By far, the most cougar complaints are recorded on the west side of the Cascades, including the coastal region, in Zones A and B. This is also where the bulk of the human population lives. More than 350 cougar complaints per year were received during the last decade in these two zones. Unfortunately, this recording system was not initiated until 2001, so we don't have data for the time before the dog ban of 1994. We do have records for administrative actions connected to human safety and pet conflicts before and after the dog ban of 1994. For eight years before the ban, they averaged only four per year, and then seven years after the dog ban, these complaints increased to 27 per year — nearly a seven-fold increase.

Oregon does have a legislatively authorized agent program wherein highly vetted houndsmen are permitted to lethally remove cats to reduce human conflict and bolster deer and elk survival. These agents work closely with ODFW district biologists. Even with this program in place, cougars are steadily increasing in Oregon, where hunting them is very impractical without the aid of dogs. At present, the law authorizing the use of agents is up for renewal, and hopefully it will receive legislative support and then be applied more broadly for both reaching zone harvest quotas and to help curb the upward statewide population trajectory.

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