

# Strong report for NE Oregon schools

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

EASTERN OREGON — It was a red-letter year for many Northeastern Oregon school districts, as numbers released by the Oregon Department of Education show that the majority of the region's counties beat state averages for graduation rates — even as graduation rates fell from 82.6% to 80.6% across the state.

Similarly, rates across Northeastern Oregon fell as well, with Baker County seeing one of the largest drops in graduation rates for the area, falling from 84.7% to 77.9% — a 6.8 percentage-point drop from last year's graduation rates.

The rest of the Northeastern Oregon counties — Umatilla, Morrow, Union, Wallowa and Grant counties — registered an above-average graduation rate.

## Leading the way

Grant, Morrow and Wallowa counties topped the list with more than 92% of their respective cohorts graduating during a pandemic year. Morrow County School District in particular shined with a staggering 96.6% graduation rate for the district.

School administrators credit the push for in-person learning — as opposed to distance learning or remote classroom environments — as a critical factor for success in rural classrooms.

"I would say one of the things we were fortunate with in Morrow County is that we were able to stay in person more than other school districts around the state," said Morrow County School District Superintendent

Dirk Dirksen. "We made a real effort to get into the limited in-person instruction as soon as we can, and just try to maximize every opportunity for the doors to be open."

Knowing that a significant portion of rural communities are without stable internet access, school districts across Northeastern Oregon had given out mobile hotspot devices for students to use at home, as well as Chromebooks to access online coursework.

Guidelines by the Oregon Department of Education for limiting the spread of COVID-19 included separating cohorts, part-time school with remote elements, or completely remote learning environments — known as Comprehensive Distance Learning, or CDL — in the case of a localized outbreak at a school.

## A mixed bag

At the individual school level, results were mixed. Pendleton High School — the flagship of the Umatilla County School District — fell from 90.4% the previous year to 78.5% in 2020-21, a drop of 11.9%. It was among the highest decreases among larger schools in Northeastern Oregon.

"The drop in our data, it's obviously disappointing, because there's student names tied to all of those numbers," Matt Yoshioka, Pendleton's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, told the East Oregonian on Wednesday, Jan. 19. "It was certainly a hard year."

Schools that recorded a lower graduation rate are Burnt River School, North Powder



Tanni Wenger Photography/Contributed Photo

**Members of Grant Union High School's class of 2020 toss their graduation caps in the air to celebrate earning their high school diplomas. Grant posted an above-average graduation rate during the pandemic year, according to state data.**

Charter School, Umatilla High School, Pendleton High School, Elgin High School, McLoughlin High School, Baker High School, Weston-McEwen High School, Baker Web Academy, Union High School, Stanfield Secondary School, Pilot Rock High School, La Grande High School and Joseph Charter School.

Schools that saw an increase in graduation rates were Cove Charter School, Riverside Junior/Senior High School, Grant Union Junior/Senior High School, Nixyaawii Community School, Heppner Junior/Senior High School, Hermiston High School, Irrigon Junior/Senior High School, Burns High School, Ione School District, Wallowa High School, Echo School, Hawthorne Alternative High School, Enterprise High School, Imbler Charter School, Huntington School and Pine Eagle Charter School.

Umatilla High School saw the largest decrease in graduation rates among schools with more than 100 seniors, with a

drop of 12%. Hermiston High School saw the largest increase for the same category with an increase of 4.2%.

Eight schools had a graduation rate of 100%, while 18 schools had a graduation rate at or above 90%. Of the 37 schools in Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Grant counties, only nine had graduation rates lower than the state average.

## On the rise

Graduation rates for Oregon as a whole have been increasing steadily over the past decade. In 2010, the graduation rate — that is, the four-year graduation rate — was just over 66%, one of the lowest in the nation. That number climbed steadily until it hit its all-time high in 2020, when the state graduated more than 82% of its seniors.

The 2021 record high still falls short from the rest of the nation. The average high school graduation rate in the U.S. was 86% in 2019, according to the National Center for Education

Statistics, and was more than 4% higher than Oregon's rates. Oregon consistently ranks lower than other states when it comes to high school graduations.

The average graduation rate for this year is the second highest rate for Oregon in recent decades.

"Eleven years ago, we were at a 76% graduation rate," Dirksen said about the Morrow County School District's graduation rates, "and so this is not a new goal of the district — we've been working on the improvement along the way and were able to highlight it this last school year."

Last year's graduation number was likely inflated to some degree by testing requirements being relaxed due to the start of the pandemic coinciding with the final months of the school year. This year, challenges with remote learning requirements and shortened school hours were an alarm for school administrators who saw that reduced in-class time could be a detriment to students.

"When we could have in person, that was our first priority," said La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza. "We recognized that not everybody participated as well as we would like with Comprehensive Distance Learning; not everybody participated as well with packet-based learning. And so we knew in-person learning was the best mode of operation for us, and so our fight has always been to be in person."

Morrow County, which saw its highest graduation rate yet, had distance learning for only a short few weeks at the beginning

of the school year, according to Dirksen. In comparison, Pendleton and Baker High School, which had remote classrooms for much longer — Pendleton for half the school year, according to East Oregonian reports, and Baker High School up until the beginning of January, according to Lindsey McDowell, public relations and communications coordinator for Baker School District — and their graduations fell by more than 10%.

But correlation does not imply causation, and the data released by the Oregon Department of Education does not include the duration that schools spent in distance learning environments. Nor did schools have control over how long they would be in distance learning beyond measures put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 among students and staff.

Curiously, Baker Web Academy — an online high school founded in 2008, and one of six web academies that reported graduation numbers to the Oregon Department of Education — had a precipitous drop in graduation rates, falling from 75.8% to 69.8%, a drop of 6% from the previous year. Just 164 of the web academy's 235 seniors graduated in 2021.

Other web academies — including Metro East Web Academy and Clackamas Web Academy — also reported a significant drop in graduation rates, with the online schools' graduation rates dropping 10.7% and 6.9%, respectively. Sutherlin Valley Online Academy, FLEX Online School and Hillsboro Online Academy also reported decreases in graduation rates.

# ODOT cautions drivers to obey road closures

By BEN LONERGAN  
East Oregonian

MILTON-FREEWATER — Vaun Miller had been dodging winter weather for four days, trying to make it home Jan. 2 to

Milton-Freewater following a trip to San Diego.

But an early January snowstorm spelled trouble for the 72-year-old Miller, bringing his drive to an end about 2 miles short of his home.

"I stopped — and the next thing I know a gust of wind hit me and it swirled and took me off the side of the road," he said.

While the highway had been closed for hours before, Miller said he didn't encounter a bar-

ricade when leaving Pendleton and a few gas station employees he had talked to were unaware of a closure at the time. Miller said he recalls seeing a barricade parallel to the highway at the road's usual closure point — the intersection with Highway 331 — but thought the sign referred to a closure of Highway 331 based on the way it was positioned.

"So on I went," he said. "And within 3 miles it was getting crazy, crazy, crazy winds — I would guesstimate at least 60 (mph)."

Despite the inclement weather, Miller pushed on. He said he encountered several other vehicles and was traveling about 20-25 mph for most of the distance. As he was approaching milepost 24, the wind kicked up higher, and Miller said he slowed to a stop as he was no longer able to see the road. The next thing he knew, the wind pushed his car into the gully.

"I had a few people stop and ask me if I was OK," he said. "And then it was about an hour before (Oregon Department of Transportation) got there."

Robin Berheim, district operations coordinator for ODOT in Pendleton, was responding to a stuck snowplow in the area when she came across Miller and gave him a ride home to Milton-Freewater. "I was real surprised when she said, 'Oh, you know it's closed,'" he said.

The next morning, snow had buried Miller's car to its roofline.

"It was buried for four days and we couldn't find it," Miller said.

## Conditions among worst in 28 years

While Miller returned a week later to dig out his belongings from the car, it was not until Wednesday, Jan. 26, that he was able to free his vehicle. Miller said he spent several days digging and received some help from passing motorists as he tried to free the car in the weeks since.

"I hate even thinking about what we would've found the following day had she not gotten to that car," said Robert Cash, ODOT transportation maintenance manager in

Pendleton.

Berheim, said road conditions the night of Jan. 2-3, were among the worst she had seen in her 28 years with the department. High winds and heavy snowfall resulted in snow drifts several feet high and obscured visibility.

"It was almost the whole length of Highway 11," she said. "I've seen it probably that bad around the Athena area, but I've never seen it go from one end to the other."

According to Tom Strandberg, ODOT Region 5 public information officer, the department reported more than 20 abandoned or stuck vehicles and tow trucks were brought in the following day to help clear the road so snow removal could resume.

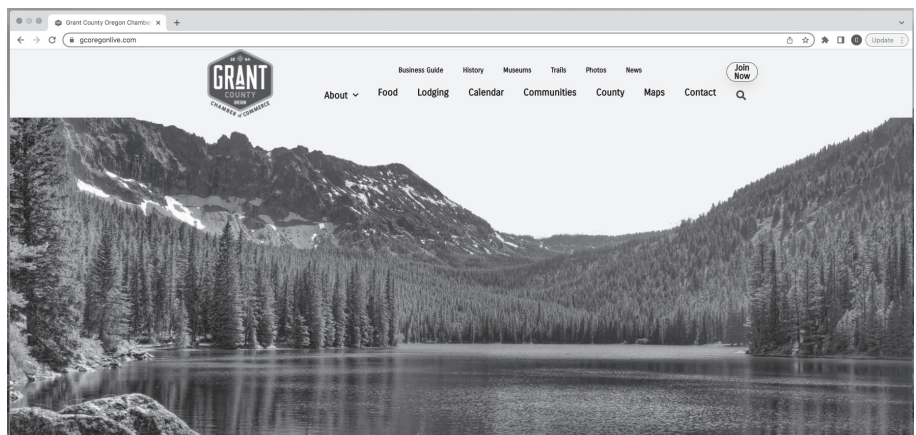
"We were worried sick about what we would find the following day with all of those vehicles that weren't following the road closure," Cash said.

Cash said the high wind speeds meant plow operators were forced to plow into the wind, putting them against the road's direction of travel. He added this practice is usually not a problem when the roads are closed, but the number of people ignoring the closure meant plows would have to stop and back up to allow for oncoming traffic.

"Generally speaking in the evenings and wee hours of the night we don't have a lot of traffic and most of the traffic we do have is locals who understand the closures — that night it just seemed like we had a nonstop parade of vehicles," Cash said.

## ATTENTION GRANT COUNTY!

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