

Presentations promote benefits of early college savings

By **SEAN HART**
Staff Writer

A pilot program will remind parents about the importance of saving for their children to attend college.

Michael Parker, executive director of the Oregon College Savings Plan, said children whose parents have a savings account in the child's name are three times more likely to enroll in college and four times more likely to graduate.

To help stress the importance of college savings, Parker said the organization created the Be College Ready program this year. Hermiston was one of five school districts in the state selected to participate in the first year.

While the Oregon College Savings Plan — a state-administered plan with tax benefits — was

started in 2001 and is available in all school districts, the new Be College Ready program was designed to better educate parents about the benefits of higher education and how to reach their college planning goals, Parker said.

Hermiston elementary students received folders, bookmarks, pencils and pens as a reminder about college savings earlier this year, and now OCSP officials will provide informative sessions and answer questions during presentations for their parents. The presentations will take place in English from 5:30-6:30 p.m. Sept. 29 at both Sandstone Middle School and Armand Larive Middle School, followed by Spanish versions from 6:30-7:30 p.m. Free pizza will be served at the events.

Although the Be College Ready program targets elementary students, the information is valuable for any level of students saving for college.

Parker said many people are not aware of the tax benefits of utilizing the Oregon College Savings Plan. Earnings from the savings plan are tax free at the state and federal level, he said, and the state also offers a tax deduction each year deposits are made.

Parker said parents have three primary options to help their children avoid student debt: savings, scholarships and current income.

"The more you can put in a plan over time, the less you're going to have to borrow or the less you're going to have to shell out as you're working," he

said. "Saving for college is really the way to offset those costs."

Michelle Jensen, Hermiston School District's coordinator of strategic initiatives, said the district is excited to participate in the program that she believes will have a significant impact on college attendance.

Jensen said financial barriers are a large concern for first-generation college students. While working on her Ph.D. dissertation, she said she presented information with different themes about going to college to young students.

"The day that I presented a lesson about finances and college was the day that I saw a significant increase in the way that students felt about themselves going to college," she said. "The bottom line is, as we

teach students about how to pay for college, they believe they can go."

Many students have often decided whether or not to attend college by the seventh grade, Jensen said, and a major factor in that decision is the financial ability to pay. She said one of the best aspects of the Be College Ready program was that it targeted not only the students but also the parents with information about the benefits of saving when the students are young.

"When parents are saving for college, the students know they have their family's support to go to college," she said. For more information about the Oregon College Savings Plan, visit oregoncollegesavings.com or call 866-772-8464.

EOTEC:

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what stakeholders want. The biggest portion of that number comes from the barns, which were budgeted at \$500,000, and the lowest bid that came in this month was for more than \$2 million.

Rushing to complete the project by spring without raising more money would mean sacrificing the quality of the project, he said, from building smaller barns to putting in only the bare minimum of lighting needed to function.

After Frew spoke, Doran said the EOTEC board's executive committee had worked out a "very aggressive" plan with stakeholders come up with at least \$2.3 million by spring. He said they weren't ready to share details yet, but everyone was confident it could be done.

"I truly believe we can get there, just like everyone else," he said.

Other stakeholders in the room expressed confidence as well. County Commissioner Larry Givens said Hermiston is a uniquely "can-do community," and Mayor David Drotzmann pointed to the success of Kennison Field, where the school district set out with a goal of \$300,000 and instead raised more than \$1 million in nine months to create a stadium that is the envy of other communities.

He said he believed they should strive for the "high-end" alternative plan of \$4 million that Frew Development had put together.

"Let's make sure this is the crown jewel promised for Eastern Oregon," he said.

INSKO:

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serve," he said.

The university is not offering face-to-face courses for fall term at the Hermiston facility, but 171 active students are being advised there while completing 12 different online degree programs, according to Jacelyn Keys, EOU's Hermiston center director. She said the university anticipates offering winter term classes at the center for its business administration program.

Insko said he wants to determine what the needs of the community are, so he can develop systems to meet those needs.

"I want to make sure we deliver and we're not just talking about it," he said.

Prior to starting at the university July 1, Insko worked for Boise Cascade for 20 years, most recently as an area manager of 18 manufacturing facilities and plants in the Pacific Northwest based out of La Grande. He holds a master's degree in business administration and said he is driven by achieving desired outcomes.

Insko has close ties to EOU. His father spent time as the university's head football coach, head men's basketball coach and dean of distance education before retiring in 1994. Insko said he practically grew

up at the university. Insko then attended himself, playing basketball and earning a degree in math and a degree in business and economics.

"This is truly a passion for me," he said. "I'm really excited about what we're going to do at EOU."

Cam Preus, president of Blue Mountain Community College, which hosted the reception at the Eastern Oregon Higher Education Center where both schools provide services, said she wanted to introduce Insko to the "progressive and energetic and visionary" Hermiston community. She said he is a great fit for the university.

"I think he's the real McCoy," she said. "He has a deep private sector busi-

ness background, and he is somebody who, as he said, will listen, not tell you what he's going to do. He's a very good choice for Eastern Oregon University and a very good partner for BMCC."

Preus said the institutions work together to provide better opportunities for students. Through the CUESTE elementary education program, for example, students can earn a four-year degree without leaving BMCC's Pendleton campus, she said.

The Hermiston site is also important for the college. Preus said about 2,000 BMCC students currently use the Eastern Oregon Higher Education Center.

Hermiston School Dis-

trict Superintendent Fred Maiocco said EOU and BMCC are "critical partners" in educating the Hermiston community. He was pleased Insko visited the community.

"My hope is that he sees how important this growing, prosperous, thriving community is to the future of Eastern Oregon University," he said. "I'm confident that the business case and the demand for education services will make the case that we need expanded offerings from EOU here in Hermiston. ... We need more collaborative work with them on a number of different fronts, so we're very excited about the opportunities in the future working with them."

OUTREACH:

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The discussion was part of the Hispanic Advisory Committee's new focus on education. Chairman Eddie de la Cruz said he was excited that the school district was willing to listen seriously to what the committee had to say and partner with them on making parental involvement opportunities more accessible to Hispanic parents.

Committee member Clara Beas Fitzgerald said for parents who don't feel confident about their English skills and have little formal schooling, the prospect of heading into a big, formal school to talk to highly educated teachers in English is intimidating.

She agreed with the suggestion of Fiesta Foods manager Leo Leal. He recommended that schools in Hermiston adopt a tradition that has been successful elsewhere of hosting a Latino parent night with food, childcare and translators to teach parents about everything from checking their child's grades online to applying for financial aid.

"They feel welcome. They feel special because it's their night and they don't have to be intimidated wondering if they're going to be the only parent who speaks Spanish," Beas Fitzgerald said.

She also said a personal touch is important. In the Latino culture a mass automated phone call shows that the school doesn't really care if parents show up to the event, she said, while teachers or volunteers making a personal phone call signals that it is important to the school that the parent come.

Audience member Blanca Rodriguez said as a parent she can testify to the importance of either providing childcare or making it clear children are welcome at events. She said for large families with children attending multiple schools it can be hard otherwise to make the arrangements to be able to attend a conference or parent night.

Eddie de la Cruz said he and the rest of the Hispanic Advisory Committee



Fitzgerald



De la Cruz

were willing to make sure there were volunteers at evening activities like parent teacher conferences to welcome Latino parents and possibly provide some translation.

Committee members also talked about helping Hispanic students. Manuel Gutierrez said extracurricular activities like sports or band or 4-H can be important to helping a student succeed, but sometimes they are

held back by not having the money to pay club fees or rent a musical instrument. He suggested the committee look into finding a way to sponsor students in those activities.

"If they are in sports, they do not have time to be running around in the streets," he said.

Beas Fitzgerald said, even though it was representatives of the high school present at the meeting, it was important that outreach to parents begin in elementary school when Hispanic kids are much more likely to listen to their parents. Older students tend to look to teachers or counselors for help instead, she said.

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"They're becoming proficient in English. They're becoming acculturated," she said. "They don't need their parents anymore because they think they know everything."

Maria Duron, who was

present as a representative of Umatilla Electric Cooperative but also serves on the Hermiston school board, said the district is making an effort to involve Hispanic parents through hiring more bilingual staff

and hosting speeches in Spanish by education reformer Dr. Luis Cruz. She said the district is always looking for ways to boost involvement.

"It's one of the biggest puzzles," she said.

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