

Hermiston children less prepared for kindergarten

Tests given at start of school year have scores lower than state average

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN AND ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITERS

Though graduation rates seem like the most obvious way to measure student progress, the key to success starts many years earlier.

The Oregon Kindergarten Assessment, a statewide test now in its fourth year, is given to each kindergartner within the first few days of entering public school.

On average, an incoming Oregon kindergartner recognizes more than 14 uppercase and 12 lowercase letters and can identify the sounds that about eight of those letters make. When asked 16 simple math questions such as number and shape recognition and basic addition and subtraction, the students could answer about 11.

In many Eastern Oregon school districts, however, the numbers are far lower. Hermiston students answered 10.1 math questions correctly, recognized 11 uppercase letters, 8.7 lowercase letters and 5.2 letter sounds. Only Pendleton and Athena-Weston students tested higher than the state average in all four categories.

Jennifer Cox, the assessment coordinator for the Hermiston School District, said the data collected does not display the impact of full-day kindergarten, because the scores are collected within the first few weeks of school. The results instead serve as a baseline for progress made throughout a student's school career.

She said because the teachers administer the tests



Desert View Elementary School kindergarteners participate in an activity during their first week of school in this 2014 photo.

HH FILE PHOTO

	Simple math questions answered (out of 16)	Uppercase letters recognized	Lowercase letters recognized	Letter sounds recognized
Statewide	11.2	14.5	12.1	8.2
Hermiston	10.1	11	8.7	5.2
Pendleton	11.9	15.1	13.1	10.8
Morrow County	11	9.7	8.1	4.8
Milton-Freewater	8.8	8.6	6.1	2.3
Umatilla	9.7	10.6	8.4	3.5
Stanfield	10.9	11.9	9.7	5.9
Echo	10.8	17.0	13.6	5.2
Pilot Rock	12.2	14.1	12.5	8.7
Athena-Weston	12.0	16.9	13.8	9.4
Helix	11.6	13.5	10.3	9.3
Ilwaco	10.0	9.7	8.2	2.4

Source: Oregon Department of Education

to their own students, they are able to immediately access the data and use it to inform their teaching.

"They can use it right away to help set up skill groups, create lessons for students," she said. "If there

are students that already know letters, they can go on to working on letter sounds."

Cox said the assessment has been helpful for tracking statewide trends, but said there were no obvious

trends to report from recent data.

In Umatilla, superintendent Heidi Sipe said the district's numbers (9.7 math questions, 10.6 uppercase letters, 8.4 lowercase letters, 3.5 letter sounds) show their students are behind the state average, even though they have preschool programs and Early Head Start in place.

"The correlation data for third grade shows that where kids come in matters a lot," Sipe said.

She added that while the state requires school districts to collect the data, Umatilla looks at the results alongside other assessments.

"We're always focused on student growth," she said. "Not where a kid is, but their trajectory."

Sipe said the district is also working on developing an early learning infor-

mation assessment system, which they hope will target students needing extra help early on.

Beyond the classroom

Umatilla-Morrow County Early Head Start Director Julie Sanders said the data highlights the importance of preparing children for school well before they get there.

"What we see in data is that when they enter kindergarten is really indicative of what progress they'll make in third grade and beyond," Sanders said. "I'd say even before kindergarten — preschool ability is greatly indicative of how they'll do in school, and if they'll graduate. Which is why we work so hard to close that gap for low-income students," she said.

Students are eligible for

Head Start based on income. But Head Start has partnered with several local school districts, including Hermiston, Morrow County and Milton-Freewater to host preschool programs. There are also Early Head Start programs in several cities.

Sanders said parents can also do several things at home to help their children, including simply getting their kids to school, being engaged in their children's education and keeping books around the house.

Some local libraries offer reading programs for young children, which can help with early literacy.

"In our weekly children's programs we always strive to work in the early literacy skills and make an effort to explain to parents why we're doing the things we do," said Mema Martinez, a Hermiston Public Library employee.

Martinez said library employees will focus on one letter of the alphabet for two weeks of storytime, singing songs and reading books that focus on that letter, as well as having children practice writing the letter.

The library also has a program called Ready2Learn, where children from birth to age five can be signed up to receive a free card where they can access books, movies, and activities at the library.

Martinez said in comparing Hermiston Ready2Learn participants' kindergarten scores with children who didn't have cards, kids who had regularly been using their cards and coming to the library had scores almost double those who did not have R2L cards. Hermiston R2L participants scored an average of 19.8 with uppercase letter recognition, compared to a district average of 11. R2L participants averaged 16.9 with lowercase letter recognition and 12.7 with letter sounds.

Burglary co-defendants change plea, reach deal

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

After being found guilty by a Morrow County jury and handed a prison sentence of almost 13 years, Daniel Faustino Arce asked to speak to his two co-defendants.

District Attorney Justin Nelson said when they were done talking, Desirea Devin of Heppner and Vera Rose Smith of Warm Springs decided to take plea deals instead of going to trial.

Nelson wasn't privy to the conversation after the Feb. 13 sentencing, but said Arce cared about Devin and considered Smith a friend, so perhaps he did not want them to suffer his fate.

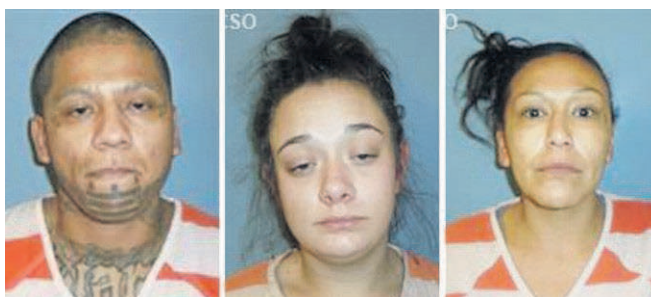
Still, all three are prison bound.

The Morrow County Sheriff's Office and Oregon State Police arrested Arce, 29, of Portland, and Devin, 23, of Heppner, after a crime spree Dec. 17 in southern Morrow County that involved burglary, armed robbery and firing a gun at victim Roger Britt.

The couple also stole a vehicle and tried to ditch it on TREGO Ranches, private property outside Heppner that offers pheasant and chukar hunting. Arce and Devin tried to set fire to the vehicle, according to court documents, and the commotion drew the attention of a crew of pheasant hunters who soon detained them at gunpoint until law enforcement arrived.

Nelson said Smith was involved in the beginning of the crimes, then broke off. Pendleton police caught her on Dec. 19.

The state charged Arce with 14 counts, but at trial merged three counts under first-degree robbery. Circuit



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

After Daniel Faustino Arce (left) was found guilty of robbery and burglary in Morrow County and sentenced to 13 years in prison, co-defendants Desirea Devin (center) of Heppner and Vera Rose Smith (right) of Warm Springs reached plea deals in the case.

cuit Judge Dan Hill also dismissed three other counts.

First-degree robbery carries a mandatory minimum prison sentence of seven years, six months under Oregon's Measure 11. Most defendants up against a Measure 11 charge, Nelson said, waive the right to trial within 60 days so the defense team has time to conduct its investigation. Not so with Arce.

Circuit court records show the jury delivered unanimous guilty verdicts on eight counts against Arce and split 10-2 on the first-degree robbery.

Nelson also said Arce wanted his sentencing right then. Again, most people ask the court to delay sentencing. Nelson said that helps the defense and prosecutors make sentencing recommendations to the court. Nelson said Arce's move had attorneys scurrying to make sure the sentence was accurate because the unlawful use of a weapon charge had to run concurrent with the robbery while the other charges were consecutive.

The prison sentence added up to 12 years and eight months.

After sentencing, Nelson said, the case took another odd turn when Arce asked to talk to Devin and Smith.

Devin faced charges similar to Arce's, while Smith faced first- and second-degree burglary, vehicle theft and first-degree theft.

Devin then pleaded no contest to second-degree robbery, first- and second-degree burglary and vehicle theft in exchange for a sentence of more than four years, according to court records. Nelson said drug addiction played a significant role in her life, and now she can get treatment.

Smith pleaded guilty to first-degree burglary and first-degree theft and took a prison term of 19 months. Nelson said she and Devin can qualify for time off for good behavior and for alternative incarceration, such as house arrest, if they meet certain criteria.

Arce cannot qualify for those incentives for the robbery, but he can try to shave time from the rest of his sentence. The trio remain in the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton. Nelson said they will transfer together to Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Wilsonville, the state's intake center for new prisoners.

Nelson said at the end, he heard one utter: "We came in together, we should go out together."

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