

Hermiston pulls elementary schools from statewide Battle of the Books

Local students have competed for 36 years

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER



SCHOLASTIC CORPORATION
“George” by Alex Gino is the story of a transgender boy and part of the Oregon Battle of the Books curriculum for 2018-19. The Hermiston School District has opted to not participate in the statewide competition because of the subject matter.

Hermiston’s schools have been enthusiastic competitors in the statewide Battle of the Books competition, but they won’t be at next year’s event.

The district’s five elementary school principals have chosen to withdraw from the statewide competition, stating that one of the books on the elementary school reading list is incompatible with the district’s curriculum.

The elementary school principals sent a letter to parents stating that the novel “George,” by Alex Gino, was not appropriate for their third- through fifth-grade students, based on their adopted human growth and development curriculum.

The book, which is not described in the letter sent home to parents, is about a child who is born male and known to all as George, but identifies as female and prefers the name Melissa. The book details how Melissa comes out to her best friend, and eventually to others, through the help of a school play.

The letter stated that Hermiston’s middle and high school teams would still participate in the statewide competition. Hermiston’s elementary school teams will instead participate in a district-wide competition, reading a list of titles compiled from books read in previous years. The letter also stated that if the statewide list for the 2019-2020 school year was deemed appropriate, the elementary schools would once again participate in the statewide program.

Hermiston School District elementary librarian Kristi Smalley said she was aware of the process, but she was not involved in the decision to pull the elementary schools from the statewide program. She said the decision, based on the subject matter of the book, was up to the administrators.

Hermiston’s elementary students have been heavily involved with the program in past years, with a team

from Highland Hills placing 16th at state this year. The letter noted that Hermiston School District has been involved in Battle of the Books for 36 years.

Smalley said the program would look roughly the same from the ground level, with students still competing and reading, and answering the same types of questions.

“The misalignment with the curriculum really needs to be the focus,” she said of the book. “There are a lot of hot-button issues that could misconstrue this, but we need to focus that this is a reading program.”

She said administrators did discuss Hermiston students not reading “George” but remaining in the state competition.

“I advised them that we can’t just not use one title, because the children would still be exposed to those questions,” she said. “But I’m really glad the district was looking out for the well-being of children.”

Smalley said the book was not available at the elementary school libraries.

She said while parents were not included in the decision, the only feedback she had heard from parents so far had been positive.

She acknowledged that the book’s placement on the statewide list had been controversial.

“There was a lot of input given to the state committee on this title that, in my opinion, fell on deaf ears,” she said.

The letter to parents was signed by principals Jake Bacon, Jerad Farley, Kevin Headings and Christie Petersen, and interim principal Bryn Browning.

Father drowns while saving son

By PHIL WRIGHT and JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITERS

Juan Carlos Armenta Madrigal gave his life the evening of Wednesday, April 25 to save his son from drowning in the chilly water of the Columbia River at the Umatilla Marina.

The boy survived but Madrigal, of Umatilla, did not. He was 35.

The boy is a second grader in the Umatilla School District, and has a sibling in the district in fifth grade.

Umatilla Police Chief Darla Huxel said an officer at 7:12 p.m. received the emergency call to respond to two people drowning at the marina.

Madrigal, his wife and 7-year-old son were fishing on the northeast corner of the property, Huxel said, a popular spot where two culverts allow the Columbia River to flow into the marina.

“That’s right in front where the current comes in the marina,” she said.

The water there is too deep to stand in, she added, and lately the McNary Dam, about a mile upriver, has released a lot of water, making for a swift current.

“You can definitely see the current going through there,” she said after visiting the site again Thursday morning.

The boy slipped and fell into the water, and the father jumped in after him. Neither knew how to swim, Huxel said, and they were not



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

A pair of culverts jut out into the Umatilla Marina near the popular fishing spot where Juan Carlos Armenta Madrigal drowned while saving his son April 25 in Umatilla.

wearing life jackets.

Madrigal tried to heft his son out of the water, but the flow moved them along the marina. Several other people nearby jumped into the river to help.

They dragged the father and son to nearby docks, where fire and rescue personnel worked to revive Madrigal, but to no avail. He died at the scene.

Huxel said the son went to Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, for treatment of hypothermia. She did not have an update on his medical condition.

Recent outdoor temperatures in the area have reached the 80s, but online data from the Fish Passage Center shows the average daily temperature of the Columbia River at McNary

Dam is 49.3 degrees.

Sgt. Dave Johnson of the Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office said the marina is a great place to fish, but he offered a word of warning.

“If you take your child near water, put them in a Coast Guard-approved life vest,” he said.

Huxel said shore anglers generally don’t wear life jackets, but the best practice is to wear the personal flotation devices while on or near water.

There is a free-to-borrow life jacket station at the Umatilla Marina, and Johnson said the sheriff’s office and others are trying to add stations at the ramp just above the McNary Dam and at Hat Rock.

He also said the sheriff’s office provides water and

boating safety classes on request. Call 541-966-3600 for a schedule or to request one.

There have been a few drownings on the Columbia River in the past several years. Last September, an Irrigon man drowned at Warehouse Beach while showing some colleagues how to swim. And in summer of 2015, two Morrow County teens drowned in the same stretch of the Columbia River, a month apart.

Cold temperatures of the water can often catch swimmers off guard, especially on hot summer days. The cold water can lead to cramping, which can leave even an adept swimmer unable to move. Fast currents and wind can also surprise swimmers and tubers.

Lawmakers test geography with Hermiston hearing

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

Civic leaders and educators asked visiting lawmakers Wednesday, April 25 to remember the eastern side of the state as they consider how to help students.

“One trend I’ve seen in my state work is that geography matters,” said Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe. “The only way to ensure that rural students with all the talent and none of the access can succeed is to ensure partnerships.”

The 14 members of the Joint Interim Committee on Student Success visited

Hermiston High School as part of the listening tour they hope will help them shape education in the years to come.

The legislators were in the middle of a three-day session in Eastern Oregon, where they met with students in Baker, Union, Umatilla and Morrow counties. They continued on to Arlington Thursday.

Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, co-chair of the committee, said they met with a range of students, mostly high schoolers, and asked them what their schools were doing well and what they’d like to see improved.

“We’re not looking for

principals’ pets,” she said. “We want students that are engaged, and not so engaged. Students in special education, English Language Learners.”

Speakers at the event shared successes of local schools, but highlighted some of the challenges.

“With this focus on student success, at some point we’re going to have to talk about funding,” said Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith. “Tax compression is an issue for us, for schools and the city.”

Smith said the city of Hermiston lost about \$232,000 to compression this fiscal year.

“It limits the ability of local jurisdictions to work on their own problems,” he said.

Smith asked the panel for any help they could offer.

“Maybe there’s a solution that allows us to work on these problems locally,” he said.

Local educators talked about the benefits of STEM programs and supporting early learning programs.

Smith Warner said they started the listening sessions in Lane County in March. She said they eventually hope to take the information they’ve gathered and work it into a package similar to the transportation package that was passed in 2017.

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