

The Oregonian

Big schools shrink toward change

High school reform in Oregon reaps improvements in test scores

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Oregon's big investment in creating small high schools is starting to pay off with the promise of higher achievement, better attendance and more diplomas.

An analysis by The Oregonian of the 11 schools operating long enough to compile a record on state test scores and other indicators show that six are improving, two have mixed success and three show little change.

The newspaper analysis reviewed test scores, attendance, dropout rates, graduation rates and student safety records over two or three years, depending on when the schools were created. Test scores for minority, special education and low-income students were checked along with overall performance to determine whether all groups of students are advancing.

Reforming high schools has been a rallying cry for education leaders across the nation. High school performance typically trails elementary and middle school achievement, resulting in high dropout rates and low achievement. That has prompted the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to pour more than \$1 billion into creating 1,700 small high schools across the United States -- primarily by converting big campuses into smaller schools.

In Oregon, Gates and the Meyer Memorial Trust are spending \$25 million over six years to create 44 of the new schools. Thirty are open, 27 of them formed from big high schools. Fourteen more schools open next fall.

Most of the new Oregon schools were formed by breaking up large, comprehensive high schools that had high dropout rates, poor test scores and not enough students going to college.

Karen Phillips, director of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative, says small high schools don't automatically produce better learning and higher attendance and graduation rates -- but they help.

"Teachers tend to have more of a sense of ownership in the schools," she says. "They tend to know the students better -- the students can't be invisible."

Among the new small Oregon schools, Liberty High in Hillsboro stands out for improving academic performance for nearly all students, as reflected in rising test scores in all areas except writing. Attendance, historically strong at Liberty, has not changed, but the dropout rate has edged down.

By contrast, Madison High in Portland, in its second year of transition to three small schools, shows worse test scores and graduation rates so far. Campus Principal Pat Thompson says large schools sometimes go through a performance dip as they convert to smaller schools. Madison leaders are making midyear adjustments to improve reading and math performance, she said.

Better performance

Marshall High in Portland was one of the first in Oregon to reinvent itself when it broke up into three schools in fall 2004. Overall, the school is performing better than it did before the breakup.

Sixteen-year-old Cody Woodbury attends the 254-student Pauling Academy on the Southeast Portland campus. He likes the intimate feel of the small school and has developed close relationships with some of his teachers.

"Here, everybody gets along," he says. "When schools are bigger, it seems like there are more things to worry about."

Rebecca Alvarez, 17, a senior, was horrified to learn as a freshman that Marshall would break into four small high schools. (The fourth small school merged with Pauling Academy in 2005 because of staff cuts.) An athlete, she wondered what would happen to the sports teams.

"How could one big school turn into four small schools, I asked myself," she recalls. "There were so many questions."

Alvarez picked the Pauling Academy for its health and science curriculum, courses she needed to pursue a college major in nursing. The Marshall campus also has a business-themed school and arts academy.

The small school works for her. She plays varsity in three sports because the schools jointly field teams. After a rocky start in high school, she now posts a 3.2 grade-point average. There are at least three teachers she can go to talk to about a problem, she says.

Pauling teachers report fewer discipline problems than when Marshall was a 1,200-student school. They smile as they see test scores rising. The percent of students meeting the state science benchmark has risen 31 points since 2004; reading performance is up 22 points. Progress isn't universal, though -- the graduation rate has slipped, and writing and math scores haven't budged.

Nationally, the Gates Foundation's own evaluations show graduation rates improving and students doing better in English. But there's evidence that students are learning less math than students at large high schools. And the converted schools have fewer of the electives that keep some kids coming to class. In some cases, breaking large schools into smaller ones provoked staff or parent backlash.

The foundation found that creating small schools alone is not enough to significantly improve urban high schools, so it is emphasizing improvements in curriculum and instruction at the schools it sponsors.

Real-life learning

Pauling relies on project-based learning -- teaching students academic skills through real-life experiences. Jill Semlick's ecology class gathers baseline data on the flying squirrel in Mount Hood National Forest through field trips set up by Wolfree, a Portland environmental education group.

On a recent afternoon, Woodbury, a junior, and 16 other students described characteristics of hemlock, Douglas fir and red cedar from swags that Semlick brought to the classroom. "You're going to figure out which of these is important to the flying squirrel," she said.

Later, Semlick led her students on a seven-minute walk to the Kelly Butte Natural Area to gather lichen and cones and talk about ideal habitat for the flying squirrel. She tells them none has been spotted at Kelly Butte, but that doesn't mean they're not there. She has them take notes about whether this urban forest has the trees and other features that might sustain the nocturnal rodent.

Semlick says this kind of extended field work wouldn't have been possible at Marshall when it was a big school. She has 87 minutes in a period -- enough time to get to Kelly Butte and back on foot -- and can barter time with other Pauling teachers to give students the chance for an overnight trip to Mount Hood for flying squirrel research.

Phillips, who oversees the Gates-Meyer grants, concedes that not all of the new schools are showing as much progress as Marshall, but it's early in the game.

"This is hard work," Phillips says. "But we are beginning to see signs that we are moving in the right direction."

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