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## State assessments reveal encouraging signs at Neah-Kah-Nie

Tuesday, October 4, 2022



*Fifth grader Braelyn Mills reads during class time at Nehalem Elementary last week. She said she likes science best and it is helping her writing too, because they have to write a paragraph about what they learn. (Photo by Jake Arnold, OSBA)*

The Neah-Kah-Nie School District was one of the few Oregon districts to show noteworthy growth in the latest state assessment results.

Neah-Kah-Nie leaders say there is no secret sauce. They attribute their success to faithfully sticking with all the ingredients in their best-practices recipe.

"We didn't let the pandemic stop the initiatives we planned for," said Neah-Kah-Nie Superintendent Paul Erlebach.

To the surprise of no one, students across the state did **significantly worse** on standardized tests in spring 2022 than the same grades did in 2019, the last time the state could gather comparable data. Average state proficiency rates fell significantly in every grade in English language arts, math and science.

Neah-Kah-Nie bucked the trend with encouraging improvements across the board in third and fifth grades. Third grade, a turning point in reading acquisition, is an indicator of early education success. Fifth grade is the foundation for stepping off to the tougher classes of middle school.

In third grade, the district improved more than 8 percentage points in English language arts and math to get more than 40% of their students proficient and above the state average.

In fifth grade, the district improved 6 percentage points in language arts to 56% and 17.8 percentage points in math, where the district went from being well below the state average to almost 7 percentage points above the state average of 30%.

The district also improved 5.1 percentage points in fifth grade science to 37.5%, beating the state average of 30.3%. Fifth grade is the first year students take the science test.

Neah-Kah-Nie leaders are quick to point out the proficiency scores are nowhere near where they want them, but the improvement in the early grades is encouraging. Educators at the district's Nehalem Elementary said there is nothing particularly unusual about the cohort that did well on the tests. Instead they see it as validation of teaching and leadership practices.

"This is a system achievement," said Nehalem Elementary Principal Kristi Mills. "A good school has good systems."

Dan Farley, Oregon Department of Education director of assessment, said it will take several years of comparable data to begin to identify success factors, but Neah-Kah-Nie's growth was unique in Oregon.

Farley said about 50 districts with at least 95% participation and at least 10 students in the cohort recorded a significant improvement in a grade or student group, but Neah-Kah-Nie was alone in its success across subjects in multiple grades.

Farley said that after speaking to a few school district leaders who saw success, he identified some commonalities: communication with parents, teacher planning time, technology available to students and use of interim assessments.

Superintendent Erlebach said those items were important to the district's success, but small class sizes and school board leadership had among the biggest impacts.

Mills said keeping class sizes down increased teachers' ability to give students individual time. The school board's goals include class sizes of 22 or below at the elementary schools.

Nehalem Elementary combines its K-5 grade levels, with nine classrooms last year. Mills works with the teachers to reshuffle the blends each year. Asking teachers to teach different grades each year is additional work but it allows the school to tailor classroom mixes to student needs, Mills said.

When the tests were taken, third graders and fifth graders were split across six blended classrooms. Mills said the differentiation required to teach those classes gave students opportunities to lead and to be exposed to higher-level learning.

Fourth grader Sawyer Bennett said being in a class with fifth graders makes him feel like he can do tough things.

"Sometimes it's scary, but it also helps," he said.

Joan Henderson, who teaches a fourth and fifth grade class, said student engagement with books that are interesting at all reading levels is key. She said being able to have small groups and big groups that engage all students is only possible with the school's manageable class sizes.

School Board Chair Sandy Tyrer said the board plans ahead in the budget to keep class sizes down. Tyrer said good communication with Erlebach keeps the board well-informed of all the district's resource needs. For instance, during the pandemic, the district paid for some families to have internet access.

Tyrer said the board tries to stay in its lane of setting policy while listening to educators on implementing the details.

"We know that they are the experts in the field," she said.

Mills also credited teacher professional development and opportunities for teachers to team with the Northwest Regional Education Service District and the district's other elementary school, Garibaldi Grade School. She said the pandemic threw everyone into uncharted waters and they had to learn to depend on each other more for what they didn't know.

Mills praised the school board for funding the things building administrators say are important, such as a literacy coach and an instructional technology coach.

"They have opinions and they listen to parents, but they also listen to teachers and to administrators," Mills said.

Mills said the biggest lesson during the pandemic was the value of supporting students with their emotional needs.

Erlebach said test scores weren't the district's focus during the pandemic.

"Our priority was the safety of our students," he said.

The district and school board took some heat for implementing health protocols, but Erlebach and Tyrer said ensuring teachers and students felt secure was essential to a good learning environment and keeping everyone in person.

Third grader Ryder Pfeifer said working with other children is vitally important.

"Whenever you talk to someone, you get their big ideas," he said.

Erlebach said the district stuck to its continuous improvement plan and used interim assessment tests to check students' progress.

Tyrer said that kind of data helped inform the board's decision-making throughout.

"If you don't have data, you are throwing darts in the dark," she said.

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*Nehalem Elementary second graders Bailey King (left) and Alaina Rogers work together on a writing assignment last week. Neah-Kah-Nie school leaders think their third-grade state assessment scores are indicators of early learning success. (Photo by Jake Arnold, OSBA)*

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