

Oregon seems to be obsessed with its high school graduation rate. The algorithm by which this rate is determined is highly questionable. A few years ago, the feds asked the states to come up with something that at least APPEARS to standardize rates — a one-size-fits-all measurement tool. But it really is like comparing apples and bananas.

There are two problems with the methodology:

- every state still creates its own standards and graduation requirements, and they are not similar or strictly adhered to in all states
- some states game the statistical data by labeling some dropouts as “homeschoolers”

Accounting for these things, Oregon’s graduation rate is really much higher than perceived in comparison to other states. Recognizing three things that contribute to Oregon’s low rate is a first step in improving graduation rates:

- poverty (more than 50% of our students are low- income);
- very rigorous standards to which we religiously adhere; and
- honesty in how we track and label

We are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on interventions identified by Measure 98 that aren’t the most effective strategies. Here are ten ways we can make a real difference:

- 1) High-quality early childhood programs;
- 2) Summer learning for all, but especially low-income students;
- 3) Universal access to health care, including mental health support;
- 4) Culturally relevant curriculum and strategies for students of color;
- 5) Lower class sizes so teachers can provide more individual attention to each student;
- 6) Wraparound services to address student needs;
- 7) More time on task (Oregon’s short school year should be similar to other states if we are to be compared to them);
- 8) Access for all students to a full range of extra- curricular activities and engaging learning experiences;
- 9) Safe schools especially for marginalized students; and
- 10) Nutritious school lunches — research shows serving good food kids like that are actually good for them could yield the best results of all these remedies.

Making sure school is a place where students want to be is the best way to improve Oregon’s graduation rate. We know what to do. Fully funding the QEM and putting these interventions in place is a good place to start. This isn’t rocket science.