

Poverty level in local schools not as bleak as stated

TRACY LOEW Statesman Journal
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For more than a year, in speeches to churches, community groups and parents, Salem-Keizer Schools Superintendent Sandy Husk has pounded home the difficulties of educating children who live in poverty.

The district's mediocre test scores are no surprise, she says, considering that more than half of Salem-Keizer students live in poverty. She wrote in this year's budget document, the U.S. Census shows that Salem has the highest number of students in poverty of any city in the state.

School board vice-chairwoman Krina Lemons has echoed that message, calling Salem-Keizer "the most poverty-stricken school district in Oregon."

But newly released Census figures show that the situation isn't quite that dire.

In 2005, 17.7 percent of school-age children in the Salem-Keizer boundary came from families living in poverty, up from 17.0 percent in 2003.

That's about the same as the state and national rates, which are 16.6 percent and 17 percent respectively.

According to the Census data, 91 Oregon school districts have a higher percentage of students in poverty than Salem-Keizer, including Portland, Woodburn and Centennial (in Portland).

Husk told parents at a Jan. 7 meeting that the district has the highest number of students in poverty statewide. Actually, that distinction goes to Portland, with 12,314. Salem has 7,394.

The district reports poverty counts to the state in order to receive extra funding for students in poverty. Those reports show the number of students in poverty hovering at about 18 percent for the past few years.

So why the confusion?

Husk said Thursday that her statements about Salem-Keizer School District having the most children in poverty were in error, and she will correct the information.

She said she was drawing from a report from the Oregon



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First-grader Tylor Gerber cleans up after eating breakfast Thursday at Hoover Elementary School.

Poverty talk

Salem-Keizer Schools Superintendent Sandy Husk will speak at 7 p.m. Feb. 13 about "The Impact of Poverty on Student Achievement in Salem-Keizer Schools." The talk is at Salem Public Library. It is sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Marion and Polk Counties and the library.

Federal poverty line

This year, the poverty line for a family of four is set at \$21,200 per year.

In 2005, poverty levels for school-age children in Oregon ranged from 41.7 percent in Plush to 3.6 percent in Lake Oswego. Salem-Keizer was at 17.7 percent.

Poverty levels for residents of all ages ranged from 8.7 percent in Deschutes County to 21.3 percent in Malheur County. Marion and Polk counties each were at 15.4 percent.

But many experts say the poverty level is set too low. When the formula was developed in the 1960s, it was based on an amount three times a family's food budget, which at the time accounted for about a third of a family's monthly spending.

Since then, the percentage a family spends on food has been overtaken by spending on housing, child care, energy and health care, said Chuck Sheketoff, the executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy.

The Northwest Federation of Community Organizations estimates Marion County's "living wage" at \$45,978 per year for a family of four. That includes monthly expenses of \$599 for food, \$636 for housing and utilities, \$906 for transportation, \$341 for health care, \$621 for household, clothing and personal

Progress Board showing that in 2004, Marion County had the highest percentage of people living in poverty among 12 urban counties studied. The Progress Board doesn't report city or school district statistics.

Husk said her statements about half the district's children living in poverty refer to the percentage receiving free or reduced-price lunches.

Still, neither the school district nor Marion County top that list either, as Husk has alternately claimed.

Ninety-two Oregon school districts have a higher percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches than Salem-Keizer. They include Woodburn, with 83.5 percent; Falls City, with 80.5 percent; and Gervais, with 76.2 percent.

And nine counties have a higher percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches than Marion County.

"My intent has been and is to show the changing demographics in our community, a growing rate in poverty of the children we serve, and most importantly how poverty can have an impact on learning," Husk said.

Families earning up to 185 percent of the poverty line qualify for free or reduced lunches. For a family of four, that's an income of \$38,203 per year.

Last school year, 47.9 percent of Salem-Keizer students qualified, according to state Department of Education records. But the rate fluctuates monthly, reaching 52.7 percent in May 2006 and 51.5 percent in May 2007.

"May is a good month to use because by the end of the school year, families are well aware of the program and have had ample time to sign up and participate," Husk said.

Lemons, meanwhile, called Salem-Keizer "the most poverty-stricken school district in Oregon" in a blurb for a speech she is giving next month at a national conference. She said that's because eight of Oregon's 10 poorest schools, measured by the percentage of children getting free and reduced-price lunches, are in Salem-Keizer.

That assertion has been made by others in the community, and Lemons said she thinks it came from a grant document written about three years ago.

But it's not true. Just one of the state's 10 poorest schools is in Salem-Keizer, according to the state Department of Education.

Hoover Elementary, where 94.4 percent of students get free or reduced-price lunches, is No. 5. The next Salem-Keizer school on the list is Highland, at No. 20, then Weddle, at No. 37.

All this is not to say that the poverty level in the Salem-Keizer School District doesn't pose challenges.

The district's poverty rate has been growing, along with the state's. Between 1999 and 2005, Salem-Keizer's poverty rate rose from 15.1 percent to 17.7 percent. During the same period,

expenses, \$430 for taxes and \$345 for savings.

Free and reduced lunch

Students from families earning up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level qualify for free lunches, and those from families earning up to 185 percent qualify for reduced-price lunches.

Free and reduced lunch rates for the 2006-07 school year ranged from 93.7 percent in Paisley to 5.8 percent in Lake Oswego. Salem-Keizer was at 47.9 percent.

Links

U.S. Census data detailing poverty rates for U.S. school districts:
www.census.gov/hhes/www/saipe/index.html

Oregon Department of Education data detailing free and reduced-price meal rates for Oregon school districts:
www.ode.state.or.us/sfda/reports/r0061Select.asp

Oregon's poverty rate rose from 14 percent to 16.6 percent.

Poor children often enter school with a smaller vocabulary and less exposure to educational experiences. That can translate into lower test scores. Last year, fewer Salem-Keizer students passed the state reading and math tests than in any of the state's 10 largest districts.

In response to the rising poverty rates and poor student achievement, the League of Women Voters of Marion and Polk Counties has taken on poverty as its issue for the year.

"We have a good many members who are aware that it's having a very heavy impact on the schools, on housing, on jobs. There's a very high percentage of people in poverty in the Marion-Polk county area," program chairwoman Rose Lewis said.

Although they recognize the problem, Salem-Keizer School Board members won't take it up as an issue, school board member Steve Chambers said.

"That's not the board's function. That's the administration's function. Our job is to determine policy and budget," Chambers said. "It's not something that comes to the school board for us to review."

The U.S. Census' most recent poverty estimates, for 2005, were released last month for each of the nation's 14,000 Title I-eligible school districts.

The official poverty figures are important to school districts because they are used by the U.S. Department of Education to implement provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, and to allocate federal money to districts.

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