

ISSUE FOUR

CHANGING EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS HAVE REDUCED THE TIME AND RESPECT GIVEN HISTORY INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Heritage education is lifelong. It takes place in classrooms, in homes and on the streets. It helps children and adults build critical thinking skills and understanding that enables them to contribute to their community and their state.

But over the past century, heritage's presence in Oregon schools, in every grade, has slowly eroded. Today, heritage education struggles due to national education initiatives, other demands on school spending, and the inability to convince the general public that investment in heritage education is important to the economy and the community.

THE HISTORY OF HERITAGE EDUCATION IN OREGON

Since the 1960s, Oregon schools have taught Oregon or Pacific Northwest history in the fourth grade. This was part of the "Expanding Horizons" curriculum that was based on the premise that children best understand the world around them if they study topics from a personal, then community, then state, then national, and finally, world perspective.

History education requirements, which are included in larger social science criteria, have changed repeatedly since 1997 to accommodate standards-based education and legislative requirements for Oregon studies in economics, government, history and geography in grades K-12.

According to the National Council for Social Studies, the federal No Child Left Behind Act requirements for reading, mathematics and science assessment resulted in less instructional time for non-assessed content areas such as history and social studies. The Center on Education Policy reported in 2008, as part of a study of the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act, that instructional time for social studies dropped in all grade levels. The drop was most dramatic at the elementary school level, where the average decrease was 76 minutes per week, or a decrease of 32 percent.

"The public schools are graduating students who are historically ignorant about their own state and nation. This is a dangerous situation for heritage organizations which will be increasingly marginalized by adults without a known historical identity or sense of place."

- Bob Hart, executive director, Lane County Historical Society.



Paulina Cemetery

THE SCENE TODAY

Heritage organizations, especially museums, frequently pay to transport students to their sites and charge them less than the cost of the programs they present. Schools report that with the increased emphasis on national testing, less time is spent on history and social studies instruction, including site visits. Further cuts are likely in the 2011-13 biennium, because of the statewide revenue shortfall.

Because the Southern Oregon Historical Society lacked staff, resources and volunteers to support a four-week-long Oregon history program that brought fourth grade students to their museums, it eliminated the longtime effort.

According to the Heritage Assessment Survey, many heritage organizations see educational value in their efforts, yet only 25 percent have created partnerships with school districts and even fewer with community colleges and universities. Regional partnerships to support teaching Oregon heritage and history, similar to the federal Teaching American History initiative, have rarely formed.

CHANGING WAYS

With schools undergoing major changes, some museums use new techniques and technology to meet educational goals.

“[I]t has really become incumbent upon us to give every way of learning possible so that the visitor can choose that, whether its a single or multiple way, and then they have something to take away with them,” says Janeanne Upp of The High Desert Museum in Bend. “We work very hard here at layered learning so that it’s not one-dimensional; we really work hard at attaching many ways for you to grasp it.”

The Gorge Discovery Center began a distance learning program five years ago to engage students and teachers unable to travel to The Dalles. “We offer video-conferencing and most schools have video conferencing equipment so they can interface with our education staff even if they can’t afford to come here,” says center director Carolyn Purcell. “They can get a lesson or learn something about what we interpret here. It’s cheap, around \$100 to do that. So we’ve been able to connect with schools all across the country. That’s been good for us; we were well positioned when no one could afford to travel anymore.”

ASKING TO HELP

58 percent of the Heritage Solutions Survey respondents said training heritage organizations how to approach educational organizations to co-create heritage curriculum that works across many disciplines would be one of the most effective ways to change heritage education.



Dayville Historical Society

TEACHING TEACHERS

53 percent of the Heritage Solutions Survey respondents said working with teacher training programs at universities to teach future teachers how to develop heritage curriculum would be an effective way to change education.



Fort Yamhill State Heritage Area

“Where area residents maintain a direct link or connection to local history, archaeological sites are more apt to be preserved. Education remains our biggest tool in maintaining the protection of prehistoric sites.”

- Dennis Griffin, state archaeologist.

HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT IS THE FUTURE?

The history teachers of the future are in Oregon’s universities today. However, according to statistics from the Oregon University System, history-related study areas count for only four percent of major study areas for undergraduate degrees and just two percent of major study areas for master’s degrees. None of the teacher-education programs require coursework in Oregon heritage or history.

Some people do not perceive a degree in history or a heritage field to be as valuable in the workplace as a business degree. However, others, such as Katherine Brooks at the University of Texas-Austin, say it provides equally good communication, thinking and other skills valued in the workplace.

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

Thousands of Oregonians learn about their heritage every year through walking tours, living history actors, plaques, and heritage events such as the Pendleton Round-Up or the Astoria Regatta. Much of this instruction is done by non-professional educators and avocational historians.

The Oregon Experience series produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting reaches tens of thousands of television viewers, and more than 25 episodes are available on its website. Southern Oregon Public Television, Jefferson Public Radio and privately owned television stations have also developed heritage programming. Numerous private and public websites contain historical information.

However, planning commissions, business developers and government decision makers may not have the history, the Oregon civics instruction or have the critical thinking skills that enable them to use heritage and history to make the best decisions possible.