

Finding solutions to fight the achievement gap

By Stefanie Knowlton

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Oregon continues to struggle to close the gap in achievement between minority, economically disadvantaged and English language learner students and their peers.

As these students make up a larger and larger percentage of the population, their potential failure has big consequences for the state and local communities. At least one in five Salem-Keizer students are English language learners, but they are less likely to graduate or hit state benchmarks.

The nonprofit Stand for Children will host a community conversation at 6 p.m. tonight to highlight the achievement gap, why it matters and ask for possible solutions. Achievement gaps create "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession," according to a 2009 study by McKinsey & Company.

"It's really a community issue that we all need to pay attention to and do something about," said Holly Fifield, community organizer for the Salem-Keizer chapter of Stand for Children.

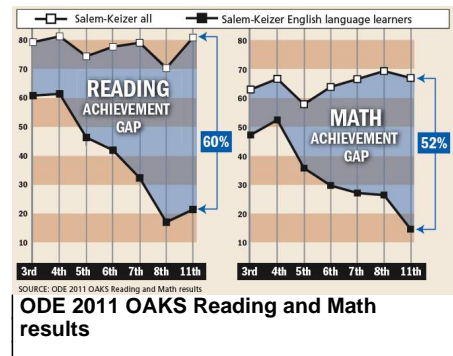
"We want our students to be good citizens, to have jobs, to work, to pay taxes and contribute to our community."

That's difficult to achieve if students are coming out of high school not prepared for college or a career, she said.

Tuesday's talk is one of eight conversations Stand for Children held around the Willamette Valley on education topics, which also included Oregon's school funding and supporting teachers and principals.

Salem-Keizer School District has made progress in closing the gap at schools such as Hallman Elementary, Washington Elementary and McKay High School thanks in part to federal grants and a local benefactor, said Eduardo Angulo with Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality.

But it's not enough, he said. By the time ELL students reach 11th grade they are about four times less likely to pass a state reading or math test. It's essential to close that gap not only as a matter of social justice, Angulo said, but also as a means of creating the best citizens for the



Community Conversation

The nonprofit Stand for Children will hold a community conversation about Oregon's achievement gap, including Salem-Keizer challenges, 6 to 7:30 p.m. today at Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality, 3850 Portland Road NE, Salem. For more information call Holly Fifield at hfifield@stand.org or (503) 689-0254.

future.

"We know the gang culture is waiting for them. We know the prison system is waiting for them," Angulo said. "Instead of paying taxes, they will end up being a drag on society."

The coalition works with Latino parents to help them become involved in their children's education through education workshops, home visits and other outreach programs.

There is definitely a need to close the gap, said Jan Calvin with Stand for Children, but the big question is what do we do about it. The gap starts out small in elementary school but grows over time, she said, which impacts graduation, college and career options and possibly adds to the cycle of poverty.

A group of eight experts will lead a panel discussion at the tonight's event. Afterward community members will break into small groups to discuss ideas that supporters hope to pass along to the Salem-Keizer School District.

"Hopefully we come out with some productive solutions," Fifield said.

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