

## Salem shows vast income gap

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The Marion Street Bridge will take you from one bank of the Willamette River to the other, from the state Capitol on the east side to the suburban strip malls on the west side, and quietly, from one world to another.

West Salem is one of the wealthier neighborhoods in Oregon, according to a recent report by The Washington Post, and downtown and North Salem are some of the poorest.

The Post ranked every zip code in America based on median income and education level, measured by what percentage of adults have college degrees. West Salem falls in the 73rd percentile nationally, which means it is wealthier and better educated than 72 out of 100 zip codes in the country.

Meanwhile, downtown and North Salem are in the 17th percentile, and northeast Salem falls in the 19th percentile. They are in the bottom one-fifth of all American neighborhoods.

Salem Mayor Anna Peterson was skeptical that Salem exhibits such stark income inequality.

“(West Salem) is a microcosm of this entire community. Don’t be misled by statistics,” she said. “There are millionaires that are downtown.”

However, the census data the Post used show an accurate picture of most other parts of Oregon. Notoriously poor, struggling areas such as Southern Oregon small towns, most of Eastern Oregon and the Portland neighborhoods of Rockwood and Old Town all are listed in the bottom one-fifth of zip codes nationally and are the poorest, least educated parts of the state.

Meanwhile, it shows some parts of Eugene, the West Hills of Portland, Beaverton and Lake Oswego as the wealthiest, best educated parts of Oregon.

West Salem is on par with Beaverton by the Post’s measure, and North and northeast are similar to Portland’s Rockwood neighborhood, known for its poverty and gang activity.

The disparity has concrete impacts. Some are aesthetic: West Salem’s neatly trimmed lawns and antiseptic shopping areas are nothing like the consignment stores and low-slung apartments along Portland Road NE.

Others require a closer look to see.

Salem-Keizer School District Superintendent Sandy Husk sees them every day. West Salem High School and North Salem High School offer entirely different experiences for their students, and their neighborhoods help create that distinction, she said.

“The education level of the families in the neighborhood has a huge impact on the kids,” she said.

Students in families with little education (just 15 percent of adults in North Salem have college degrees)

have less access to technology and to varied life experiences, from traveling to visiting the zoo.

“So much of literacy is being able to link what you learn to experience,” Husk said, and low-income, less-educated families struggle to provide those experiences. It’s not a lack of desire, she said. Families in North Salem want as much for their kids as families in West Salem do, she said, but they lack the money and personal experience to do it.

For example, Husk tells the story of a trip the school district arranged to take students and parents from low-income families to visit colleges. (Families in West Salem, she said, typically do these trips themselves.) It quickly became clear that the mothers in the group didn’t realize their children could visit home on the weekends.

After they realized they didn’t have to say “good bye” for 10 full months, their attitudes toward their children attending college changed entirely, she said.

And money itself matters too. Husk said wealthier schools rely on fundraising to give kids field trips and programs the district can’t pay for, but schools in poor neighborhoods can’t do this. It becomes particularly apparent in athletics, Husk said.

The disparity goes on and on. Where West Salem offers water polo and fencing clubs, North Salem offers Junior ROTC and woodworking. Where 65 percent of students at West Salem pass the state writing test, only 44 percent of students at North Salem do.

Where one-third of West Salem students are poor, three-quarters of North Salem students are.

Peterson didn’t have a specific plan to address Salem’s economic disparity. She suggested part of it can be attributed to state employees who hold good-paying jobs in Salem but live elsewhere, taking that income with them.

“One of the things that I know about Salem’s demographics is that we have many managerial, specialized jobs, but those checks get cashed in Lake Oswego and Tualatin,” she said.

However, she said creating more jobs in Salem is the best way to solve the economic imbalance.

“Jobs is the crucial thing for us as a government to be doing,” she said.

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