The State We Are In

Schools are closing, housing is scarce, roads need money, and the state budget has nearly doubled. What happened to the state we thought we were building?

By Thomas Gerrie

October 7, 2026

On Monday night, October 5, 2026, Oregon's largest school district put fourteen schools on a list of buildings it may close.

Thirteen elementary schools and one middle school. Buckman. Creston. Marysville. Woodmere. Lewis. Maplewood. Stephenson. Irvington. Rose City Park. Sabin. Beach. James John. Peninsula. Sellwood. Under a second scenario, three of those schools survive and eleven close. Under the larger plan, twenty-two other schools would absorb students from the buildings that disappear, thirty-eight attendance boundaries would change, programs would move, and thousands of Portland families would have to redraw the daily map of childhood, of parenting, of family life.

The Portland School Board has not voted yet. Superintendent Kimberlee Armstrong is expected to make a recommendation in November, with a final decision by the end of the year and most changes beginning in the fall of 2027. The district says it has lost more than six thousand students since 2018 and expects to lose thousands more by 2031. It is also staring at another enormous budget problem, with a projected $65.2 million reduction needed for 2027–28. Armstrong has said the proposed closures are not simply a way to erase that deficit. Her argument is that Portland is spreading teachers, programs and resources across too many under-enrolled buildings to provide the same educational experience everywhere.

That distinction matters. So does what happened the next morning.

At Creston Elementary, parents arrived before children did and covered the pavement in chalk drawings and messages for students and teachers. By Tuesday evening, families were packed outside the school district headquarters. A seven-year-old first grader from Maplewood stood at the rally with her mother. Another father brought his four-year-old daughter, who is supposed to begin kindergarten at Maplewood next year, if Maplewood still exists as a school she can attend.

This is what a budget problem eventually looks like when it reaches a child.

And this is no longer an isolated Oregon story.

Earlier this year, Salem-Keizer Public Schools announced that it was considering closing as many as eight elementary schools. Eugene 4J has been confronting a large structural deficit. Beaverton considered closing four elementary schools in 2024 before shelving the plan after public opposition. Across the country, declining birth rates and enrollment, expiring federal pandemic aid, rising labor and operating costs, and buildings designed for student populations that no longer exist are forcing districts into versions of the same conversation. But in Oregon the conversation has begun to feel less like an abstraction and more like a pattern.

I know because my son is already living inside one version of it.

Benjamin started fourth grade this year at Sunset Primary in West Linn. He is ten and has attended Sunset since kindergarten, so the building itself is almost invisible to him in the way the permanent places of childhood become invisible: the same hallways, the same playground, the same doors, the same place where I pick him up. What changed this year were some of the children.

Last December, the West Linn-Wilsonville School Board voted unanimously to close Bolton and Stafford Primary Schools and suspend the district's preschool program. The district described a heart-wrenching dilemma created by declining enrollment, insufficient operating revenue and the prospect of losing still more teachers. Students were redistributed. About thirty-three former Bolton students came to Sunset. Roughly one hundred and ten former Stafford students went to Willamette Primary and another sixty-four to Cedaroak Park. One of Benjamin's good friends from basketball, who attended Stafford last year, now goes to Sunset.

There was a detail in the chronology that made the decision especially difficult for some parents to absorb. Six weeks before the closure vote, West Linn-Wilsonville voters had approved a $190 million capital bond for safety improvements, repairs, modernization and technology. Bond money and operating money are legally different things; those dollars could not simply be redirected to salaries or ordinary school operations. But two weeks after voters approved that enormous investment in the district's physical future, Superintendent Kathy Ludwig presented a fiscal plan that included closing two schools. To a parent, the legal distinction did not necessarily make the sequence feel less surreal: first, invest $190 million in the school system; then discover that the system cannot afford to operate all of its schools.

Kieran O'Connor, whose third grader and kindergartner attended Bolton, told Oregon Public Broadcasting it felt like a broken promise repeated across multiple years. Jennifer Zhao, the

Bolton Co-PTA president, had moved her family across the country for Bolton's Mandarin immersion program. She told KOIN that her trust in the district was gone.

A father saying the promises kept breaking. A mother saying the trust was gone.

Bolton did not become an empty building.

This summer, Clackamas Education Service District leased the former primary school and moved its Heron Creek Therapeutic Program there. Children still walk through Bolton's doors. They are K-12 students who need intensive social-emotional, behavioral-health and academic support, and the old elementary campus now gives that program a gymnasium, library, cafeteria and playground it did not previously have. That is not a footnote to the story or evidence that the closure somehow did not happen. It is evidence that public institutions are rarely as simple as the language we use for them. Bolton ceased to be the neighborhood primary school it had been for generations and, almost immediately, became something else that Oregon children also needed.

The building remained useful. The institution changed.

This is West Linn-Wilsonville, one of the state's wealthiest communities, with some of its strongest graduation rates and voters willing to approve enormous investments in their public schools. If a district like this can contract, redistribute children and eliminate neighborhood schools while simultaneously investing millions in its educational infrastructure, then "not enough money" is not an adequate explanation. Something more complicated is happening.

And school closures are only where I happened to notice it first.

This is an election year. Governor Tina Kotek and Christine Drazan are asking Oregonians to choose between them again, four years after their first race. Campaigns will spend millions telling us what Oregon has become, who caused what went wrong, who deserves credit for what improved, and which numbers ought to frighten or reassure us.

Before somebody answers those questions for me, I wanted to look.

Not first at the candidates, but at the state: at the schools, the houses people cannot afford, the roads we cannot seem to fund, the unemployment checks that did not arrive, the tents beside freeways, the addiction system Oregon tried to reinvent, the billions of dollars moving through Salem, the companies exporting Oregon products around the world, the things that have improved and the things that have deteriorated and the things that stubbornly refuse to fit inside anybody's campaign advertisement.

For roughly the past eight years, Oregon has struggled to make many of its public systems match the considerable advantages it possesses. Those years span two governors, a pandemic, enormous federal intervention, a housing crisis, an addiction crisis, profound economic disruption and consequential decisions made not only in Salem but by Oregon voters themselves. No governor created all of what follows, and no governor governs on a blank page. Institutions have histories. Crises leave wreckage. National forces do not stop at the state line. Decisions made decades earlier can become somebody else's emergency.

But governing must eventually mean more than explaining the inheritance.

Oregon remains wealthy, educated, inventive, productive and connected to the world. We make semiconductors and wine and wheat and software and athletic shoes. Our Class of 2025 graduated at the highest rate the state has recorded. Violent crime has retreated from its post-pandemic highs. There are universities doing remarkable work, companies selling Oregon-made products across oceans, farms producing food from some of the richest ground in the country, and mountains and forests and rivers and coastline of such extravagant beauty that sometimes the easiest thing to forget about Oregon is how fortunate we are to live here.

And this is also Oregon: fourth graders scoring below the national average in reading and mathematics; an economy that has recently grown more slowly than the country as a whole; unemployment above the national rate; a housing shortage measured in tens of thousands of missing homes; homelessness dramatically higher than it was eight years ago; and a transportation funding package enacted by the governor and Legislature in late 2025 and rejected by Oregon voters by more than eighty-three percent the following May.

These are not two different states.

Both things are true.

That contradiction is the state we are in.

Oregon's educational numbers are difficult to reconcile with the Oregon many of us imagine ourselves to inhabit.

On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the closest thing the country has to a common academic yardstick applied consistently across all fifty states, Oregon's fourth graders scored seven points below the national average in reading and eight points below the national average in math. Washington's fourth graders, taking the same assessment after the same pandemic, scored essentially at the national average in mathematics. Between 2019 and 2024, Oregon's fourth-grade reading score fell eleven points, one of the steepest declines recorded by any state in the country over that period. On Oregon's own assessments for the 2024-2025 school year, only 40.3% of Oregon third graders met the state standard in English language arts, and only 28.9% of eighth graders met Oregon's standard in math.

Fewer than three in ten eighth graders.

Benjamin is ten years old, almost exactly the age of the children represented by those NAEP scores.

Some of that decline occurred across two years shaped by decisions made in Salem. Governor Kate Brown ordered Oregon schools closed in March of 2020 in response to the pandemic. Many large districts remained primarily virtual through much of the following academic year, and in March 2021 Brown ordered statewide in-person and hybrid reopening, roughly a year after the original closure. Oregon's public schools were among the longest closed in the nation. Every state endured the pandemic. Every state closed schools. Children everywhere lost classroom time, routines, friendships, teachers, sports, performances, and every state has spent the years since trying to understand what that interruption cost. But the duration of the interruption was not the same everywhere, and neither were the choices. Oregon kept many of its children out of classrooms longer than most of the country, and the children who lived through those decisions are now old enough for the consequences to be measured.

And there was another problem waiting for them when they returned.

The pandemic did not create all of Oregon's educational problems, and school closures cannot explain all of what followed. In 2022, Oregon's own Secretary of State Audits Division examined the state's K-12 education system and warned about weak accountability and inadequate oversight in the machinery meant to ensure that schools actually delivered what Oregon required of them, a system in which poor performance could persist even after major new investments. Auditors called for clearer and more enforceable standards and stronger monitoring of district compliance. This came after Oregon had already committed enormous new resources to education, including the roughly two-billion-dollar-per-biennium Student Success Act passed in 2019. Money was entering the system. What remained less certain was whether Oregon had built a system capable of determining, consistently and consequentially, what that money was

accomplishing. Oregon had substantially increased its investment in schools without building accountability structures capable of reliably telling taxpayers whether those investments were producing the results they had been promised.

And yet Oregon has just recorded the highest high school graduation rate in its history. The Class of 2025 graduated at 83%, roughly nine percentage points higher than a decade earlier, a monumental achievement for a state that has struggled for years to get more of its children across that stage with a diploma in their hands. That progress is real, and it deserves to be celebrated. It is also true that in the same year, in the same public school system, fewer than three in ten eighth graders met Oregon's own math standard. A diploma and a proficiency exam are not the same measurement, but they belong in the same conversation, and Oregon is currently producing an unusual gap between the two. Oregon is graduating more of its students than ever before while a substantial majority of its eighth graders cannot demonstrate proficiency in the mathematics Oregon itself expects them to know.

The West Linn-Wilsonville closures were the leading edge of something larger. What was speculative a month ago has become considerably more concrete. Portland Public Schools has now released two detailed rightsizing scenarios: one would close fourteen schools, thirteen elementary campuses and Sellwood Middle School; the other would close eleven. Under the larger scenario, twenty-two receiving schools would absorb students and thirty-eight attendance boundaries would change. The district says it has lost more than six thousand students since 2018 and projects thousands fewer by 2031. Salem-Keizer is separately considering the closure of as many as eight elementary schools. Beaverton considered four closures in 2024 before backing away. Eugene 4J continues to confront a substantial structural deficit. Different districts, different buildings, different communities, but the pressures recur: fewer children enrolling, operating costs rising, facilities built for populations that no longer exist, and temporary federal pandemic aid gone.

What happened in West Linn-Wilsonville was not an anomaly.

It was an early version of a conversation now moving across Oregon: which schools remain open, which children move, how many teachers can be kept, how large classes become, which programs survive, and what happens to a neighborhood when the building that helped define it becomes something else.

Benjamin will be in sixth grade when Portland's proposed changes are scheduled to begin.

It would be easy to tell the West Linn-Wilsonville story as evidence that Oregon simply does not spend enough on education. The reality is stranger than that.

For most of Oregon's history, local property taxes paid most school costs. Then Oregon voters fundamentally rewrote the system. Measure 5, passed in 1990, capped property taxes for education. Measure 50, adopted in 1997, imposed further limitations on assessed-value growth and property tax collections. Before Measure 5, the state supplied less than one-third of Oregon's nonfederal school funding. After Measures 5 and 50, that relationship essentially reversed. Roughly seventy percent of Oregon's nonfederal school funding now comes from Salem.

Oregon school districts are therefore unusually exposed to decisions made in the state capital, and unusually dependent upon a revenue system that is itself unusually concentrated. Personal income taxes are projected to provide approximately eighty-six percent of Oregon General Fund revenue during the 2025-27 biennium. Oregon has no general sales tax. Its individual income tax system reaches a top marginal rate of 9.9% above $125,000 for individual filers and $250,000 for joint filers, among the highest state marginal income tax rates in the country.

The impression that Oregonians therefore shoulder the highest total tax burden in America turns out not to be correct. Oregon's state and local tax collections work out to approximately $7,604 per person in 2026, placing Oregon roughly in the middle of the fifty states, and its total state and local tax burden as a share of personal income is about 10.8%, slightly below the U.S. average of 11.2%. The structural fact worth naming is not that Oregonians pay uniquely high taxes. It is that Oregon has concentrated its tax burden on a small number of narrow instruments while relying on the volatility of income taxation for the overwhelming majority of its general fund.

That concentration creates a paradox. The state depends overwhelmingly on income tax receipts, one of the most economically sensitive sources of public revenue. When income tax revenue significantly exceeds the state's forecast, however, Oregon's constitution generally requires the excess to be returned to taxpayers through the kicker. For the biennium that ended in 2025, Oregon collected $1.41 billion more than the forecast had predicted. That triggered a kicker equal to 9.863% of qualifying taxpayers' prior-year state income tax liability, returned through 2026 tax filings. Oregon voters have repeatedly chosen the system, and the system embodies a principle Oregon voters have repeatedly endorsed: unexpectedly high revenue should generally return to taxpayers rather than become available for new permanent spending. But the kicker helps explain a phenomenon that can otherwise feel absurd. In the same period during which Oregon returned $1.41 billion to its taxpayers, the West Linn-Wilsonville School District closed two of its elementary schools because it could not afford to keep them open.

"The state has money" and "the schools have money" are not the same sentence. Oregon is filled with such walls. Taxes dedicated to one purpose cannot automatically be moved to another. Transportation funds are constitutionally restricted. School funding is shaped by property tax limitations imposed decades ago. Federal money frequently arrives with restrictions on how it may be spent. The kicker removes certain unexpectedly high revenues from future legislative discretion. Every one of these restrictions has a constituency, a history, and often a defensible original rationale. Together they have produced a fiscal structure that resembles geological strata, one generation's limits layered upon another generation's programs layered upon another generation's taxes, until eventually someone has to operate the machinery, and the machinery does not always work.

The paradox becomes sharper when you look at what Oregon actually spends.

In nominal dollars, the state's total legislatively approved budget has nearly doubled in ten years. Oregon's 2015-17 biennial budget totaled approximately $71.7 billion across all funds. The 2025-27 biennium is $138.9 billion. The General Fund, the piece of the budget the legislature has the most discretion over, has grown even faster in proportional terms, from roughly $18 billion in 2015-17 to approximately $37 billion projected for 2025-27. Federal funds surged and then partially receded as pandemic-era programs wound down. State employment has grown. Investment in schools, health care, housing, and behavioral health has grown. The Student Success Act alone added roughly two billion dollars per biennium to K-12 funding beginning in 2019.
Adjusted for inflation and for Oregon's own population growth, the increase is considerably smaller than the nominal doubling suggests, but it remains substantial. Cumulative U.S. inflation from 2015 to 2025 ran approximately 34%. Oregon's population grew about 6% over the same period. Working the math honestly, real per-capita Oregon government spending has increased by roughly 36% over the past decade. That is not the 94% the nominal figure suggests. But it is not nothing. It is a substantial real increase in what Oregon government has to work with per Oregonian, sustained across a decade, and the outcomes documented above, from educational proficiency to transportation maintenance to housing production to behavioral health capacity to unemployment insurance responsiveness, have not tracked the increase in any measurable way.

The obvious question is what the money bought.

The answer is neither what critics of Oregon government nor defenders would prefer it to be. Some of the additional spending is straightforwardly explained by growth: Oregon has more people to educate, more people to insure, more people to house, more roads to maintain, and prices for everything the state buys have risen substantially since 2015. Some of it went to programs

the state's own auditors have documented as under-executed. Measure 110 committed hundreds of millions of dollars to a recovery infrastructure the behavioral health system was not able to build. The Student Success Act expanded school funding without the accountability structures the auditors had recommended. The unemployment insurance system received significant investment before the pandemic and was still overwhelmed when the pandemic arrived. Some of it went to genuinely new commitments the state had made and continues to be working toward: shelter beds that did not exist before, rental assistance that kept 25,900 Oregonians in their homes, semiconductor incentive dollars that were absorbed just before the current tariff cycle began.
Both explanations turn out to be true, depending on which corner of state government one is examining. Oregon does not primarily suffer from too little revenue. Oregon does not primarily suffer from too much revenue. What Oregon appears to suffer from is a persistent gap between what its government is asked to accomplish and what its institutions have been able to deliver against those commitments, even in periods of substantially expanded resources.

That gap is not inherently partisan. It has developed across decades and through decisions made by voters themselves. But political accountability cannot be distributed so widely that it disappears altogether. Oregon has been governed continuously by Democratic governors since 1987. Whatever portion of the present condition is attributable to executive governance rather than constitutional structure, federal policy, economic forces or voter initiatives therefore belongs principally to Democratic administrations.

Drive a few miles from Sunset Primary, and you encounter the much larger construction project on Interstate 205, where the Abernethy Bridge crosses the Willamette between West Linn and Oregon City. Anyone living near it could be forgiven for wondering whether the bridge will ever be finished. But this is one place where the visible frustration and the engineering reality need to be separated. The project is not merely resurfacing a bridge. Oregon is widening it, rebuilding interchanges, and strengthening the structure so it can survive a major Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake. When finished, ODOT says it will be the first earthquake-ready interstate bridge across the Willamette in the Portland area. It is also the largest construction project ODOT has undertaken in forty-five years, and its current completion target is 2027.

A large seismic bridge project taking years is not by itself evidence that Oregon government cannot build anything. What surrounds the bridge is more concerning.

Oregon's transportation agency entered 2026 facing an approximately $297 million deficit in maintenance and operations, on top of a $354 million State Highway Fund biennial shortfall

for 2025-27 that ODOT itself had projected. Before the current legislative session, ODOT had prepared to lay off around five hundred employees, roughly ten percent of its workforce. Four hundred and eighty-three of them received layoff notices. They were the Oregonians who plow winter roads and respond to crashes and stripe lanes and staff DMV offices and answer the phone when someone in a snowstorm calls to ask where the road is passable. The prospect of dismissing them was politically untenable, because the state understood, correctly, that the visible things transportation policy is supposed to produce would begin disappearing with them.

In the 2025 regular legislative session, Democrats put forward an $11.6 billion, ten-year transportation package. It failed in the final hours of the session, with Republican House members, led by Christine Drazan, running out the clock. On July 22, 2025, Governor Kotek called a special legislative session. A slimmed-down replacement, House Bill 3991, was passed. It raised approximately $4.3 billion over ten years through higher fuel taxes, vehicle fees, and a doubling of the payroll tax supporting public transit. Governor Kotek signed the bill on November 7, 2025. Signature collection to refer the tax and fee increases to voters began immediately. Nearly two hundred and fifty thousand signatures were gathered. On January 7, 2026, at the Oregon Transportation Forum, Governor Kotek publicly called for the repeal of the transportation bill she had championed and signed just two months earlier. In the 2026 short legislative session, the legislature scrambled to close the immediate funding gap by other means, redirecting $218 million into maintenance and operations from bridge, seismic, Safe Routes to School, and Connect Oregon programs, and cutting authorized spending by another $78 million. Oregon solved a transportation shortfall by taking transportation money away from other transportation purposes. And on May 19, 2026, the same primary election ballot that produced Kotek and Drazan as the two candidates for November, Oregon voters were asked to weigh in on the transportation package themselves. Measure 120 asked whether the fee and tax increases enacted by HB 3991 should stand. Voters rejected it 83% to 17%.

In the spring of 2020, a Washington County resident named Audrey Heesch applied for unemployment benefits and could not get anyone at the Oregon Employment Department to tell her what was happening to her claim. Months passed. In September of that year, she testified remotely to the Oregon Senate Committee on Labor and Business, one of dozens of Oregonians describing what it was like to wait. "It is confusing", she said. "It is terrifying. I don't understand what's going on." And then, in a sentence that survives in the OPB coverage of the hearings and belongs in any honest account of what Oregon's public systems felt like from inside a kitchen where money was running down: "I cannot get help from a human being to give me direction."

Oregon's unemployment insurance system, which had been flagged for years by internal reviewers as technologically outdated, buckled under the pandemic-era surge in claims. Hundreds of thousands of Oregonians filed. Many waited weeks, some waited months, for benefits they were legally entitled to receive. A subsequent state audit documented that the crisis had exposed serious risks in the state's ability to deliver benefits during a large-scale economic shock and had highlighted the need to modernize a system that had failed Oregonians at exactly the moment they most needed it. Every state's unemployment system was stressed by the pandemic. The audit language is the aftermath. Audrey Heesch is what the failure sounded like in real time, on the phone, waiting.

Oregon has serious problems is not the same claim as Oregon has no economy. Oregon remains an extraordinarily productive export state. In 2024 it shipped roughly $27.9 billion in goods abroad. Computer and electronic products alone accounted for approximately $11.3 billion.

That trade dependence turned dangerous in 2025.

Oregon's exports fell 17% in 2025, a decline of $5.8 billion, while American exports overall increased 5.7%. For the first time in recent memory, Oregon imported more goods than it exported. Oregon's semiconductor industry lost approximately four thousand jobs during 2025. The Port of Portland recorded a fifty percent drop in exports during one five-week span after the Trump administration's April 2025 tariff announcements.

That is not exclusively an Oregon story. In August of 2026, Governor Kotek's office released a state economic analysis whose title said most of what needs to be said about it: "Tariffs didn't start Oregon's economic slowdown, but they exacerbated it." Oregon importers paid nearly $3 billion in tariffs between March and December of 2025 as the effective tariff rate on Oregon goods climbed from roughly 2% to roughly 15% by the fall. The total estimated revenue loss to the state came to approximately $442 million for the biennium. The report concluded that the export collapse likely reduced Oregon's GDP growth by more than a full percentage point relative to the national trend.

Two things are true at once. Oregon's economy entered 2025 already vulnerable, having built an unusual amount of its modern industrial base around one extraordinarily valuable but cyclical cluster of semiconductor and related technology firms. And Oregon's economy in 2025 was then hit disproportionately hard by federal tariff policy over which the state had no control.

Some of what looks in the raw numbers like Oregon dysfunction is national policy landing more heavily on a state whose economic structure makes it more exposed to that policy than most. Oregon's population has hovered around 4.25 million for the last five years, dipping slightly in 2022 before arriving at 4.27 million by 2025. Washington grew from 7.73 million in 2020 to eight million in 2025, adding more than seventy thousand people in the last twelve months alone. The net effect on Oregon's population has been essentially flat while its neighbor to the north has continued to grow. That is not the pattern of a state proving irresistible to the country's next generation of workers and families.

Perhaps nowhere is the gap between Oregon's identity and Oregon's outcomes more visible than housing. For generations, Oregon has treated land as something worthy of protection, an idea rooted in one of the country's most influential statewide land-use systems. There is much worth protecting. Anyone who has driven from Portland to the coast, or south into the Willamette Valley, or east into the high desert, knows what that fifty-year commitment to preserving farmland and forest and wildlife corridor has spared Oregonians from becoming. But whatever ideological position one takes toward the land-use system, the physical math is unavoidable. Oregon does not have enough housing.

We know approximately how much it does not have, because Oregon has begun counting the absence. The state's 2026 Oregon Housing Needs Analysis establishes an annual production target of approximately 29,000 homes, roughly two-thirds of which falls at price points affordable to households earning less than sixty percent of area median income. Governor Kotek's original 2023 goal was 36,000 homes annually. Actual annual housing starts in 2024 came in at approximately 14,416, well below either target. Building permits are up 11.3% this year while national permitting is down 1.3%, which is a real reversal and belongs in the accounting, but the underlying production shortfall against documented need has continued to widen rather than close.

The consequences are visible beneath freeway overpasses, in tents, in the parking lots of schools where families are living in cars, in the rents that consume more than half of many working households' incomes, and in the number of young families who cannot begin to imagine buying a home in the communities where their own parents once could. Oregon's own housing agency found that in 2023 the state had approximately 47.5 homeless people for every 10,000 residents, the third-highest rate among the states in the analysis. Only New York and Vermont were higher. The eight-year trajectory tells the fuller story. Oregon's annual homelessness count stood at roughly 14,476 people in 2018, near the end of Kate Brown's first full term. By 2022, near the end

of her second term, the count had grown to approximately 17,959. By 2023, that number reached 20,142. And Oregon's 2025 Point-in-Time count, conducted on a single January night under the Kotek administration, recorded approximately 27,119 people experiencing homelessness statewide, the highest total the state has ever recorded and roughly double the 2018 number.

The most recent picture is more complicated than that raw increase implies. Sheltered homelessness accounted for most of the growth between 2023 and 2025, expanding forty-nine percent, while unsheltered homelessness grew twenty-seven percent, meaning the share of Oregonians experiencing homelessness who were literally on the street rather than in a shelter actually declined. Unsheltered homelessness among families with children fell approximately forty percent over the same period. Kotek's homelessness emergency declaration, in place since her first month in office in January of 2023, has, by her administration's accounting, delivered 6,286 new or maintained shelter beds and rehoused approximately 5,539 previously unsheltered people, while another 25,900 Oregonians facing eviction were kept in their homes. Central Oregon's Point-in-Time count showed a nineteen percent overall reduction. Yamhill County reported a twenty-five percent decrease.

National homelessness, meanwhile, declined in 2025. Oregon's rose.

One of the 5,539 rehoused Oregonians was a grandmother named Shelley. Metro's supportive housing services program told her story earlier this year. She had worked for years as an in-home health aide while simultaneously caring for her granddaughter, a girl born with two rare genetic diseases requiring round-the-clock care. In 2022, the balance collapsed. For more than a year, Shelley and her grandchildren lived without permanent housing, moving from motel to motel, sometimes as often as weekly, hauling a roomful of medical equipment each time because her granddaughter's compromised immune system made even a shelter dangerous. "All I wanted was a roof over my head", Shelley told Metro. "When one person said no, I had to keep looking. I started to lose hope." She eventually secured an Oregon City apartment with a Metro-funded Regional Long Term Rent Assistance voucher.

Shelley is one household. The 27,119 is thousands of households, each with its own version of the medical equipment being loaded and unloaded every week, its own version of the phone calls to 211 and churches and county offices, its own version of the fear of losing hope. Oregon's official definition of students experiencing homelessness, drawn from the federal McKinney-Vento Act, explicitly includes children living in motels, shelters, cars, campgrounds, or doubled up with other families because they have nowhere else adequate to go. Some of the children walking into Oregon fourth-grade classrooms this year do not wake up in bedrooms.

Benjamin goes to Sunset from a bedroom in a house his father owns.

The state's emergency intervention appears to be working on the piece of the problem it was designed to work on. And the underlying pressures producing homelessness in the first place, including the housing shortage, the affordability crisis, wage stagnation relative to rent, and the collapse of certain categories of employment, have continued to worsen faster than the shelter and rehousing response has been able to catch. The election will determine who inherits it next.

Something else happened during those eight years that belongs adjacent to the housing story, because it involves the same behavioral health infrastructure the state's homelessness response depends upon.

On a downtown Portland sidewalk in December of 2023, a man who gave his name as Joseph lay curled in a sleeping bag, sick from fentanyl withdrawal. He was part of a pilot program that had launched only that month, in which officers with the Portland Police Bureau's bike squad were partnered with addiction treatment providers to offer people using drugs in Old Town an immediate connection to care. An officer asked if he was interested in treatment. He said yes. The officer called a nearby outreach worker from the nonprofit Mental Health and Addiction Association of Oregon, and within an hour, after nearly sixty minutes on the phone locating a bed and juggling insurance issues, Joseph buckled himself into a blue sedan that would drive him to detox. He completed it. About a month later, according to reporting by OPB and ProPublica, he was continuing his recovery in an intensive outpatient program in Portland. He had asked not to be identified further, to protect his medical privacy. What Oregon voters had approved in November of 2020, when they passed Measure 110 by roughly a fifty-eight to forty-two percent margin, was a public-health rather than a criminal-justice pathway for exactly the sequence of events that got Joseph off a sidewalk and into treatment.

The measure decriminalized personal possession of small amounts of controlled substances, including heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine, replacing criminal penalties with a $100 fine that could be waived through a health assessment call to a state-funded hotline. It also directed hundreds of millions of dollars in cannabis tax revenue toward a new statewide network of addiction recovery services. Oregon would become the first state in the country to treat drug use primarily as a health condition rather than a crime.

The public-health system the measure envisioned was never fully built. Implementation began under Governor Brown in early 2021 and continued under Governor Kotek after January of 2023. A state audit covering the years 2021 through 2025 concluded that the addiction recovery

infrastructure Measure 110 was supposed to create had remained substantially unrealized because of persistent structural and operational weaknesses in Oregon's underlying behavioral health system. Roughly $800 million had been awarded to providers over the audit period. The hotline was underused. The provider network was incomplete. Coordination among the Oregon Health Authority, county governments, and community-based organizations was poor. Most remarkably for a program designed around measurable health outcomes, the auditors concluded that the Oregon Health Authority had not collected sufficient information even to determine how many people had been served or what outcomes the program had produced. The state had spent hundreds of millions of dollars implementing a policy the state could not, by its own accounting, measure the effect of.

And meanwhile, the drug landscape Measure 110 had been drafted for changed underneath the policy. Fentanyl, still emerging as a mass-market street drug in 2020, became by 2023 the single largest driver of Oregon overdose deaths, and the harm-reduction infrastructure the state had promised to fund proved unable to keep up with the new epidemic. Portland's downtown fentanyl visibility became a national story. Overdose deaths climbed. Public opinion turned. In March of 2024, the Oregon legislature passed, and Governor Kotek signed House Bill 4002, restoring criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of controlled substances effective September 1, 2024.

The Measure 110 story is difficult to describe partisanly. The voters approved the policy. Two Democratic governors implemented it. Recovery Works Northwest opened Oregon's first Measure 110-funded medically monitored withdrawal facility in East Portland in September of 2023. The state auditor documented that Oregon's behavioral health system was not capable of doing what the voters had asked it to do, and that the state could not even measure what it had accomplished with the money it had spent trying. The legislature partially reversed the policy under a Democratic governor.

What the episode revealed was not primarily whether decriminalization was a good idea or a bad one. What the episode revealed was that Oregon had built neither the criminal-justice infrastructure nor the public-health infrastructure capable of responding adequately to a drug crisis, and that when asked to shift from one to the other, the state was unable to reliably reproduce, at scale, the chain of events that got Joseph off a sidewalk in December of 2023 and into an intensive outpatient program a month later. There is a sadness particular to that finding. The state was not failing an abstraction called Measure 110. The state was failing to reliably reproduce a rescue.

The temptation now would be to announce the verdict. Oregon is failing.

Except that would be too easy, too broad, and in several important respects untrue. Oregon's graduation rate is the highest it has ever been. Its exports still approach $28 billion a year. Its public pension system is comparatively well funded by national standards. Its property tax burden is not among the highest in America. Its absence of a sales tax leaves low-income households protected from a major category of consumption taxation that residents of Washington encounter every day. Violent crime declined significantly in 2025, in line with a broader national trend that has confounded the political narrative that every visible sign of disorder corresponds to an unprecedented crime wave. Unsheltered family homelessness has dropped meaningfully under a sustained state emergency response. Overall tax burden as a share of income is slightly below the national average, not above it. Housing permits are rising while national permits are falling. Oregon is not a failed state.

It is a rich American state with extraordinary natural resources, major universities, world-class companies, productive farmland, enormous human capital, and one of the most beautiful physical environments on Earth. We should therefore expect it to work.

Why does Oregon always seem to be out of money? That may be the wrong question, because Oregon is not always out of money. Sometimes Oregon has so much money that the constitution requires the state to give $1.4 billion of it back to its taxpayers. Sometimes the state's total budget doubles in ten years while the outcomes the state promised to purchase with the money remain stubbornly unimproved. The deeper problem is that Oregon has accumulated, over decades, a fiscal structure in which different pots of money are collected differently, restricted differently, distributed differently, and governed by constitutional provisions written in different political eras and reflecting different political fears. Oregonians restricted property taxes. That moved school funding toward Salem. Oregonians rejected a sales tax. That left Salem heavily dependent upon income taxes. Oregonians adopted the kicker. That limited the government's ability to retain unexpected income tax revenue. Transportation remained dependent in significant part on fuel taxes and fees while vehicles became more efficient and construction became dramatically more expensive. Federal transportation money arrived but could frequently be spent only for federally approved purposes. Cities and counties accumulated their own restrictions. And through all of it, Oregon continued accumulating public obligations.

Each individual decision had a constituency, a history, and often a perfectly defensible rationale. Together they have produced something resembling geological strata, one generation's limits layered upon another generation's programs layered upon another generation's taxes.

Eventually someone has to operate the machinery. And sometimes the machinery does not work very well.

The last eight years put the argument into unusual relief. Governor Brown left office in January of 2023 having presided over school closures among the longest in the nation, an unemployment insurance system whose failures the state's own auditors have since documented, a homelessness crisis that had grown by nearly a quarter under her administration, and the early implementation years of a voter-approved drug policy the state was not equipped to execute. Governor Kotek inherited every one of those institutional strains. Three years and eight months into her term, the trajectory has not clearly reversed. Homelessness is higher. Educational proficiency remains weak. Transportation financing has collapsed and been rejected by the voters four-to-one. Population growth has stalled. Measure 110 has been partially reversed under legislation Kotek herself signed. Housing production remains at roughly half of the state's own target. Two of the state's largest school districts have announced plans to close as many as eighteen elementary schools between them beginning in the fall of 2027. That is the record. The election will determine who inherits it next.

Oregon has tried, generation by generation, to be a particular kind of place. It has protected its farmland when other states paved theirs. It has funded schools more equitably across rich and poor districts than most states do. It has treated addiction as an illness that deserves recovery rather than merely a crime that deserves punishment. It has sheltered families rather than let them freeze under overpasses. It has committed to building an earthquake-ready bridge across the Willamette because the science says a bridge that cannot survive a Cascadia event will not survive a Cascadia event. It has returned unexpected tax revenue to its citizens on the principle that the state should not permanently keep money it did not permanently expect. These aspirations are not incidental to Oregon. They are Oregon. The failures documented above are painful precisely because the aspirations are real. The distance between the Oregon we meant to build and the Oregon we have actually built is where the disappointment lives.

We value education. Four in ten third graders meet the state English language arts standard, and Oregon's fourth graders posted a sharp reading decline between 2019 and 2024. We value infrastructure. The transportation agency needed an emergency legislative intervention to cover a $297 million operations deficit, the funding law the governor herself signed was disowned by the same governor two months later, and Oregon voters rejected the whole package on a primary ballot by a margin of nearly five to one. We value housing. Oregon estimates it needs to produce roughly 29,000 homes a year and is producing roughly half that, and the state's homeless population has nearly doubled since 2018. We value public health. Voters approved decriminalization; the state's behavioral health system proved unable to deliver the promised recovery infrastructure; the state could not even measure what the money it spent had

accomplished; the policy was partially reversed within four years. We value economic opportunity. Unemployment is above the national average, and Oregon exports suffered an extraordinary decline last year that federal tariff policy substantially worsened. None of those statistics tells us whom to vote for. They tell us what whoever wins has to govern.

I do not know how much of any of this Benjamin understands yet.

He is ten. He is in his fifth year at Sunset, and he knows that school the way a child comes to know a place through thousands of ordinary repetitions: which door he walks through in the morning, where his classroom sits in relation to the gym, where his friends gather, which teachers belong to which hallways, where to go when the bell rings, where his father will be waiting when the day is over. He notices his school because he lives a considerable part of his life there. What he cannot yet know is why some of the new children are at Sunset instead of Stafford or Bolton, or how many adults in how many rooms had to make how many choices before a child who once belonged somewhere else became his classmate.

Children inherit our public institutions before they understand that they are inheriting anything.

They walk into the school that remained open and the school that changed purpose, the classroom with twenty-five children and the classroom with thirty-five, the teacher who stayed and the position that disappeared. They sit in the library with a librarian and the library without one. They are given the counselor with time to know their name and the counselor responsible for hundreds of names. They cross the bridge we strengthened before the earthquake and the bridge we decided could wait. They find the treatment bed that was waiting when someone finally asked for help, or discover that there was no bed waiting at all. They sleep in the motel room a grandmother carried medical equipment into for another night. They grow up in the neighborhood a teacher can still afford to live in and the one she cannot. They inherit what we chose to pay for and what we chose not to, the money we spent and the money we returned, the programs we created, the promises we made, the obligations we accumulated, the systems we maintained, and the systems we allowed ourselves, little by little, year after year, to stop expecting very much from.

Long before our children are old enough to vote on any of it, they are already living inside the decisions we made.

Many of Oregon's problems were built across decades, through governors and legislatures of both parties, ballot measures and constitutional amendments, federal programs and local decisions, economic forces far beyond the state's borders and choices made entirely within them. There is no single year in which Oregon became what it is, no single administration responsible for everything that has gone wrong, no election capable of repairing all of it.

The adults in Oregon get another election in November.

The children do not get another childhood while we decide what to do.

The fourth graders sitting in Oregon classrooms this year will be young adults in 2036. Ten years is not very long. They will be voting, working, paying taxes, raising families, teaching classrooms, caring for patients, building houses, perhaps leaving Oregon because they cannot afford to remain here, perhaps staying because we gave them reasons to. They will drive across the bridges we chose to strengthen and the ones we postponed. They will pay into systems whose rules were written before they were born. They will search for homes in communities where we either made room for them or did not. Some will bring children of their own into public schools still carrying the consequences of budgets, bonds, closures and consolidations decided while their parents were themselves small enough to carry backpacks through elementary-school doors.

And someday what we call policy will simply be the world they remember growing up in.

A state is not something that happens to us. We make one.

We make one through thousands of decisions too small, individually, to feel as though they are determining the character of a place, until enough of them have accumulated that they have. A school closes. A classroom gets larger. A housing project is approved or denied. A treatment bed is funded or isn't. A bridge is repaired or deferred. A tax is imposed, rejected, restricted, returned. A school-board seat changes hands. A bond passes. A family leaves. Another family arrives. Another year goes by.

And eventually all those small decisions become a state.

This November, Oregonians will make some of those decisions again, and other elections will follow, and the ones closest to home can carry consequences far beyond the size of the office or the attention the race receives. A school board helps decide how classrooms are staffed, which programs survive and which buildings remain neighborhood schools. A city council makes decisions that can shape whether hundreds of homes exist a decade from now. A county commission can help determine whether treatment exists when someone finally asks for it. A

planning decision made in a nearly empty room can alter what a neighborhood or a small Oregon town becomes for the next generation. State government is not separate from any of this. The state is partly what all of these decisions become when enough of them accumulate.

There is a main road in West Linn I drive often enough that the building once called Bolton Primary used to register as part of the landscape. Its purpose has changed now. The neighborhood children who would have attended Bolton have been reassigned elsewhere, while children in the Heron Creek Therapeutic Program use the building for another kind of education, another public need.

A few miles away, Benjamin is at Sunset.

His friend from Stafford is there. Thirty-three children who once would have gone to Bolton are there too.

Thirty-three.

It is almost absurdly small beside the numbers Oregon uses to describe itself. Twenty-seven thousand people experiencing homelessness. Twenty-nine thousand homes needed each year. A $297 million transportation shortfall. A $1.41 billion kicker. A state budget measured in tens of billions of dollars.

But states are not actually lived in billions.

They are lived one person at a time.

One child in a classroom. One family looking for a home. One person waiting for treatment. One worker waiting for an unemployment check. One driver crossing a bridge. One teacher wondering whether her position will exist next year. One parent opening a ballot at the kitchen table and deciding what kind of place all of them will have to live in together.

That is where the enormous numbers eventually arrive.

That is where government eventually arrives.

That is where our choices eventually arrive.

Thirty-three children changed schools. Somewhere else in Oregon a teacher lost a position, a family found a shelter bed, a patient found treatment, a road project was postponed, a house was built, another was not. None of these things alone is the state of Oregon.

Together they are.

There will never be an election called *What Kind of Oregon Shall We Leave Our Children?*

There will only be all the smaller choices that answer it.

The school-board race. The bond measure. The county commission vote. The planning decision that seems too small to matter. The meeting almost nobody attends. The parent who runs for a seat nobody else wants. The teacher deciding whether to stay. The young family deciding whether it can. The voter who reads to the bottom of the ballot and the voter who does not.

None of these choices looks large enough to become Oregon.

Together, they are Oregon.

A state is not only its capitol or its governor or its legislature. It is millions of people deciding, over and over again, what they are willing to pay for, what they are willing to protect, what they are willing to change, what they are willing to demand, and what they are willing to allow to become somebody else's problem.

That is the harder meaning of inheritance.

We receive one.

And then, whether we mean to or not, we make one.

Benjamin is ten. The children beside him are ten, and nine, and eight. They cannot choose the schools or budgets or tax systems or housing markets or bridges or treatment systems we hand them.

Not yet.

We can.

So we have to.

The adults in Oregon get another election in November. Then another budget. Another legislative session. Another school-board election. Another bond measure. Another public meeting. Another chance to pay attention before the thing that seems too small to matter becomes one more layer of the state our children will someday inherit whole.

We cannot choose what we inherited.

We are choosing what they will.