

OUR VIEW

Schools' compliance is the proper move

It's one thing to mandate masks. It's an entirely different matter when fines are being doled out for noncompliance. Yet, that is the exact route the state of Oregon has taken.

Last month, Gov. Kate Brown required all K-12 schools to have pupils within their walls wear masks this fall.

That news itself was tough enough to swallow. Then, the Oregon Health Authority took it a step further.

Beginning Thursday, Aug. 12, schools that do not comply with the new mask mandate face a fine of up to \$500 per day, per incident.

It sounds all too much like the mandate in the Affordable Care Act that required a citizen to sign up for health insurance or face a fine.

This makes the decision for local school board members who want to advocate for local control that much more difficult — comply, or face a fine.

So far, all school districts in Union and Wallowa counties have agreed to comply, and it's the right move to make.

Though, from a financial standpoint, they didn't have much choice. As La Grande Superintendent George Mendoza explained in a note to the district, "Each occasion of a verified mask violation is subject to a \$500 fine at the school site. \$500 for each instance is a violation ... per student ... per staff ... per occasion ... in the same day."

Love them or hate them, masks are a good idea in the school setting for now with cases skyrocketing again. No, students have not been getting sick from coronavirus at nearly the rate as adults or the elderly, but some recent reports seem to indicate the delta variant — the most prominent one in the U.S. currently — is having a more severe impact on the younger population.

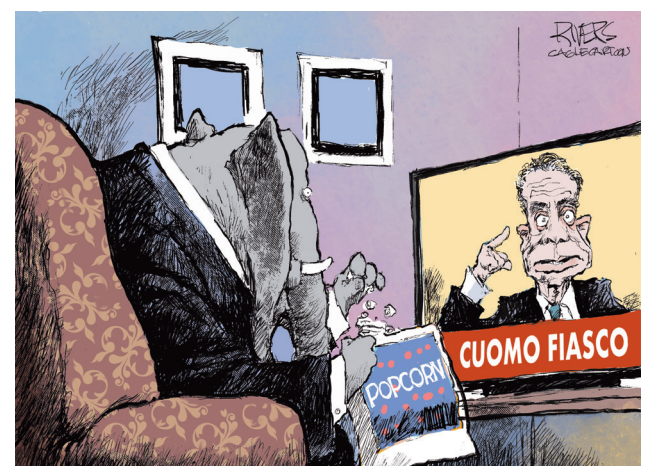
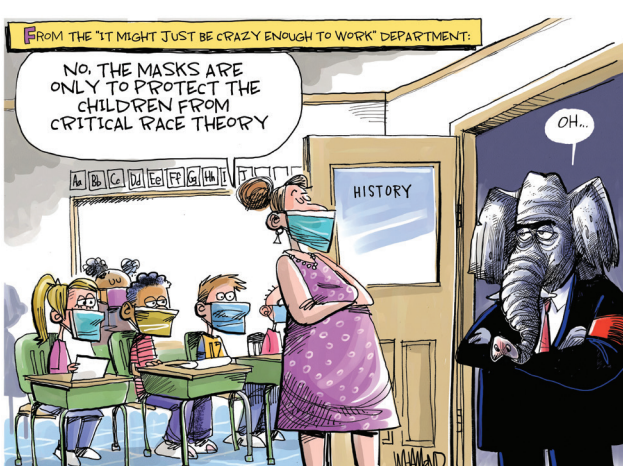
But it is not a good idea to, in this instance, strip away the local authority that was just given to the counties. And then to go a step further and say you're going to fine dissenters?

It feels like that crosses a line.

Everyone is tired of the rules. Tired of the masks. Tired of coronavirus. Tired of the hospitalizations. Tired of all the politicization of this 18-month mess of mayhem.

But these rural Oregon school districts can't stand to lose more money in fines, either.

As much as this publication would like the control to stay local — and believes that is the correct move — this is an instance where, at least for now, it is best for the districts of Union and Wallowa counties to comply with the rules and mask students and staff.



Risk and reward in the backcountry



Outdoor adventures can restore the soul, inspire beautiful art, poetry and music, and change lives for the good.

They can also end in tragedy. I read several recent reports of people coming face-to-face with nature with dramatic results. One was a Michigan woman who died while on a guided rafting trip in the Grand Canyon, swept away from an established campsite by a flash flood.

Another was a man in Southwestern Oregon who wandered lost for 17 days before being rescued; he thought he was taking a short hike from his car to a lake for fishing.

One tragic loss of life, one incredibly fortunate rescue, both the result of a natural quest for adventure in the backcountry.

Kathy and I have had a few of our own close encounters of the natural kind. Perhaps the experience that impacted us the most happened while we were teenagers. We were climbing Mount Hood with the Portland-based Mazamas group, hoping to summit the peak and thereby qualify for membership in the club and gain access to the club's mountain cabin.

It was a bright sunny Memorial Day weekend, and as we neared the final pitch to the top of the mountain we were instructed to attach our crampons and rope up. We tethered ourselves to a half dozen other climbers to traverse across a steep, icy slope. Kathy and I were tied about 10 feet apart

in the middle of this string of climbers, halfway across the slope, when we heard the screams of "Rock! Rock! Rock!"

We recognized this as the universal warning that there were rocks careening downslope.

Our fellow climbers on the left scampered left and those to the right scrambled right, leaving Kathy and I hung out like marionettes on a string and directly in the path of the tumbling rocks. We hit the snow and tucked into fetal positions as snow and scree began flying over and landing on and around us.

We both felt a tremendous sharp tug on the rope before the noise and chaos ended.

I remember hearing people to the right of me crying out "Is she all right?" and people to the left of Kathy yelling "Is he okay?" We dug ourselves out and found that a large boulder, about 4 feet in diameter, had landed and stopped directly on the rope between the two of us, jerking us toward it. I couldn't see Kathy and she couldn't see me, so we were incredibly relieved to find that neither was injured. We each had about 3 feet between us and the rock.

Our group had to all untie to pull the rope through from under the rock to free it, allowing us to continue across the slope and eventually to the summit.

We realized how close this was to tragedy — a couple of feet one way or the other and one of us wouldn't be around to continue our life together, get married, have and raise our kids, and be each other's best friends for life.

One point of this story is that having public lands and backcountry gives us the opportunity to explore and experience nature

in the raw, including all the risks and rewards that go along with it.

To be sure, more experience allows us to better recognize risks, be better prepared, and consequently have even more successful outings.

Still, there are risks, and sometimes bad outcomes.

Mother Nature is indifferent about all of this. She is not malicious, nor is she benevolent. She just is.

Experienced backcountry adventurers don't see their encounters with nature as battles, but rather as a sort of cooperative effort; they take what nature gives them, learn to work with that, and are better for it.

Too many mosquitoes at the lake? Make camp on a small knoll where breezes keep the insects at bay.

Facing a steep trail with innumerable switchbacks up a rocky open slope? Get an early start to complete the climb in the shade.

Worried about losing your bearings while traveling off trail in the backcountry? Learn to use the sun and your own shadow to keep a relatively straight course instead of traveling in circles.

We are so fortunate to have millions of acres of public lands in our backyard for rest, play and rejuvenation. With this comes responsibility for our own well-being in the backcountry, including preparation, experience, flexibility and knowing our limits. This often means the difference between tragedy and a good story to tell.

Luck should be the last thing we rely on to get home safe.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

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