

THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

September 21, 2021

TUESDAY EDITION

\$1.50

COVID-19 Schools face the challenges of coping with virus

La Grande and Imbler school districts have students and staff out due to COVID-19

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The first 16 days of the school year have been fast-paced for Doug Hislop, Imbler School District's interim superintendent.

Still, Hislop does not talk like time is flying by.

"It feels like I've been in school six months instead of 16 days. We've had a lot of things happen in a short period of time," Hislop said on Monday, Sept. 20.

Hislop explained that he has his hands full addressing COVID-19 issues and taking on added responsibilities because of teachers who are out due to the pandemic. The Imbler School District as of Friday, Sept. 17, had about 20 students out due to COVID-19, one who tested positive and another 19 who are quarantined because of close contact with a positive case.

The numbers are also disheartening in the La Grande School District where last week 21 students tested positive for COVID-19 and 56 students were quarantined because of close contact with someone who is COVID-19 positive. This means 77 La Grande School District students are out due to COVID-19.

"There is a lot of COVID-19 in the community," La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza said.

In addition, the school district had three staff members out after testing positive for COVID-19 and another four out because of close contact with someone who was COVID-19 positive.

A school-by-school breakdown indicates that last week La Grande High School had 16 students who tested positive for COVID-19, La Grande Middle School and Greenwood Elementary School each had two students out and Central Elementary

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Longtime musician and newly hired Imbler music teacher Mark Emerson teaches a class of middle and high school students at Imbler on Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2021. Emerson is working with all ages across the district.

A new challenge

Imbler music instructor Mark Emerson brings accomplished past to new position

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

IMBLER — Mark Emerson is embracing his next challenge in life.

The accomplished musician this fall became the K-12 music instructor in the Imbler School District. Emerson is looking to use his background in playing music and teaching private lessons to elevate the music instruction at Imbler.

"I enjoy working with all different age groups because there's such a large spectrum," Emerson said. "Music education is ginormous, there's always something to learn."

Taking on a new challenge with students, instead of audience

Emerson moved to La Grande in 2012 after living in California following his graduation from the University of Oregon with a bachelor's degree of music in percussion and performance in 1987. In California, Emerson performed as a studio drummer and classical percussionist. He played at big-name Hollywood venues such as the Whisky a Go Go, Hollywood House of Blues and the Viper Room, and collaborated with many accomplished producers and musicians.

Emerson and his wife, Lea Emerson, an accomplished musician and teacher herself, spent 24 years in California



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Mark Emerson, the new music instructor at Imbler High School, performs at the Eastern Oregon Beer Festival with The Wasteland Kings on Saturday, Aug. 14, 2021.

before moving to La Grande. Since then, the couple has taught private lessons in the area, and Emerson has performed with The Wasteland Kings.

Emerson and his wife began doing college ministry at Eastern Oregon University at the K House on campus, while taking on K-8 private Christian school contracts, private lessons and substitute teaching. Emerson was open to the challenge of being a full-time music instructor and drawn by the health benefits and retirement offered at the school district.

"It became a natural fit to gravitate from the private music teaching into the public sector," Emerson said. "It was kind of one of those things to pursue because I enjoy teaching music and it's good for my family."

Setting the tempo

Emerson is excited about teaching a wide age range at Imbler. With years of experience teaching all ages, he knows that

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Statewide vaccine mandate looms locally

State employees, education and health care workers face deadline

By **DICK MASON**
and **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — La Grande Fire Chief Emmitt Cornford, like many people, isn't looking forward to Monday, Oct. 18.

That's the day Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 vaccine mandates take effect. The mandate will apply to state

employees, health care workers, and teachers, support staff and volunteers in kindergarten through 12th grade schools. All will be required to be fully vaccinated by as early as Oct. 18.

Cornford said the vaccine mandate is causing extreme concern among his firefighters and his emergency medical technicians.

"I think we could lose a number of positions over

that," Cornford said at the La Grande City Council meeting on Sept. 1. "We just can't afford that."

'It's a real tough spot to be in'

The fire and emergency services employs 12 firefighters, three captains, one administrative assistant

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine sit in a tray at the Center for Human Development vaccination clinic in La Grande on Friday, Aug. 5, 2021.

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

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Issue 111
2 sections, 16 pages
La Grande, Oregon

Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
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THURSDAY

A THEORY ABOUT CATTLE MUTILATIONS

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