

SCHOOLS

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School had one. La Grande High School had two staff members test positive and the La Grande School District's district office had one person test positive. Athletic squads at LHS that have hit speed bumps because of the pandemic include its volleyball team, which is sidelined because a number of its players have had to quarantine due to COVID-19 exposure. Some of the team's games have been rescheduled as a result. LHS will resume action Sept. 29 with a rescheduled road match against Ontario.

LHS Athletic Director Darren Goodman said he wants to help his school's athletic teams take part in as many competitions as possible without putting them at risk.

"We err on the side of safety. We are trying to give as many opportunities to participate in sports as we can but do it as safely as we can," Goodman said.

The 20 students the Imbler School District has out due to COVID are all members of its middle school football team. These players in grades six through eight were self-isolated or quarantined Sept. 17 after it was determined that one of the team's players was COVID-19 positive and had had close contact with his teammates. About two weeks earlier the Imbler High School football team also had a player test positive, forcing many of the squad to be quarantined through Wednesday, Sept. 15.

Of the Imbler School District's 19 teachers, four were out on Sept. 17 because of COVID-19 or exposure to someone who has tested positive for it. The loss of 21% of Imbler's teaching staff puts a strain on the district since it is having a difficult time finding substitutes. This forced the school district's two administrators, Hislop and high school principal Mike Mills, to add substitute teaching to their list of responsibilities.

Hislop said the Imbler School District is overcoming the challenges of COVID-19 because of help from its staff.

"I'm fortunate to have a great staff to deal with issues. The staff at Imbler is No. 1," Hislop said.

He noted that when an elementary school teacher was recently out, one of the needs created was for someone to monitor at recess. An email was sent out requesting volunteers and six teachers offered their help.

Mendoza, like Hislop, said teamwork is key to overcoming the hurdles posed by the pandemic.

"It is hard but we will work through it together," Mendoza said.

He said his major objective is to be able to keep schools open so they can continue to provide in-person instruction and meet the social and mental health needs of the students.

EMERSON

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different approaches have to be taken for each individual student.

"I've done all levels, preschool through college," he said. "When you're doing K through 12, you have to find the spark in the glitter with each age group and work with it, not against it, because it can be challenging."

Covering the entire school district, he will be working with students who are picking up an instrument for the first time all



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Mark Emerson, an accomplished musician, teaches a music class Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2021, in the Imbler School District. As the new music teacher, he will bring his musical skills and experience to all students in the district.

the way to experienced high school musicians.

"When you're working with younger kids, you

really have to work with their strengths, and as they get older you bring more challenges in," Emerson said. "It's kind of an age-appropriate challenge."

Emerson has high expectations for the older age groups, knowing that they have the capability to become strong musicians. He noted that the high school level musicians can put together pleasing musical renditions.

"With the older groups, you can reach some pretty superb level of playing for students," he said. "That's exciting when they present

something and do it really well."

Emerson teaches kindergarten through sixth grade in one building and operates in the Imbler music room for seventh through 12th grade classes. He said he is excited to help create new musicians out of the younger age ranges and to hone the talent of the older groups at Imbler.

"It can be really exciting to see them get really good at it," Emerson said. "You can get a lot of satisfaction and gratification because they can be quite talented at a young age, which is really cool."

MANDATE

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and one fire chief. Cornford and the fire department have been looking to fill an open position since December and even modified the application process to allow students in paramedic programs to apply as long as they can finish the program within 90 days of hiring.

The vaccine mandate no longer allows for unvaccinated employees to receive regular testing if they choose not to receive a vaccine. Employees in the department will either have to be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18, or file a religious or medical exemption. If any unvaccinated employees choose to get vaccinated before the deadline, Cornford still is concerned with the time frame to get both shots before the deadline.

"Even if we have individuals that choose to get vaccinated, we're getting into a real time crunch depending on what vaccine you use," he said.

The impact could loom large. Cornford emphasized his apprehension of potentially losing fire and emergency services staff and health care workers at the same time.

"They're educated in health care," he said of the employees facing the mandate. "They're intelligent, healthy people that are making decisions that are best for them. ... It's a real tough spot to be in."

Jerid Ployhar, vice president of the La Grande Professional Firefighters Local 924 Union, stated the vaccine mandate could greatly impact staffing and that unvaccinated employees are processing the personal choice and deciding on the next steps moving forward. For those who decide to file an exemption, he recommended doing so as soon



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Firefighters with the La Grande Fire Department respond to a structure fire in the Oregon Department of Transportation sign shop the morning of Monday, March 29, 2021. Employees in the fire department will either have to be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18, or file a religious or medical exemption.

as possible to avoid any loss of staff.

"We don't want to see the city of La Grande lose that service," Ployhar said.

Police Chief Gary Bell said the vaccine mandate will not impact local police officers unless they are a state employee. In that case, the vaccine mandate will apply.

La Grande City Manager Robert Strope noted city employees are not directly impacted by the mandates, but the potential loss of firefighters impacts the city. If there were to be a number of firefighters who resign or are let go because of the mandate rules, the city would look to fill the vacant positions as quickly as possible.

School districts could rely on substitutes

North Powder School District Superintendent Lance Dixon is not extremely worried about the possibility of not having enough teachers

and staff when the mandate takes effect.

"A large percentage of our staff is vaccinated," Dixon said.

The superintendent is holding off on making firm plans regarding what the school district will have in place for Oct. 18 because of the uncertainty of the moment. Dixon explained there are many unknowns about the vaccine mandate, including its legality, whether the unions the school district's teachers and staff belong to will recognize it and how people will qualify for medical and religious exemptions.

He also said it is important to remember if COVID-19 rates drop significantly, school districts could regain local control and the state vaccination mandate possibly would no longer be in effect.

Dixon said he hopes if the mandate does take effect, it will not cost his district any staff members.

"We value all of our staff tremendously," Dixon said.

InterMountain Education Service District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said all members of his staff who receive vaccination exemptions will be required to be tested for COVID-19 on a weekly basis. This could involve educators in Union County since it is served by the InterMountain ESD.

Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells said he is asking all members of his staff to submit their vaccination status to him by Oct. 18. They will report on if they are vaccinated and, if not, whether they have received exemption status for religious or health reasons.

Should some staff members not meet the vaccine mandate by the deadline, the Union School District will have to bring in substitute teachers.

"That is a big concern because we are for-

ever short of substitute teachers," Wells said.

He encourages anyone interested in working as a substitute to contact the Union School District.

Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit said the vaccine mandate is a non-issue at the moment in his district. Pettit said he believes, based on anecdotal information, including from staff members who have voluntarily told him of their status, that close to 100% of his employees are vaccinated.

The superintendent also said neither of the unions representing his district's teachers and classified staff have voiced opposition to the vaccination mandate.

"We have received no pushback from either of the unions," Pettit said.

Scott Carpenter, the La Grande School District's assistant superintendent, said the vaccine mandate's rules have been presented to all of the school district's employees. Carpenter said the school district is offering assistance to employees who are concerned the mandate could affect their employment status.

Imbler School District Superintendent Doug Hislop also said he hopes the mandate does not cost his district any of its staff.

Hislop noted if an employee does not meet the mandate's requirements by the deadline, a third option could be to provide the staff member an opportunity to work from home. He said, however, that he knows of only one position in the Imbler School District for which it might be possible for the individual to work from home.

"We have a great staff," Hislop said. "I am not interested in losing any of them."

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