

As masks mandates lift, Oregon parents say they trust local schools

By ANNA DEL SAVIO
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Most parents in Oregon say educators have been keeping their kids safe during the COVID-19 pandemic as the state's mask mandate comes to an end.

While coronavirus outbreaks in schools haven't been a recent problem, just under half of parents said outbreaks in schools in their area had been a problem in the month prior to completing an early February survey. Meanwhile 64% of Oregon parents thought their area's K-12 schools were doing a good job keeping students safe and minimizing the spread of COVID-19.

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center's survey, which was conducted before state officials announced that the mask mandate would end no later than March 31, found that 81% of Oregonians were at least somewhat concerned about hospitals being too short-staffed to treat all patients.

Susannah Krug, who has three school-age children, said she was nervous about the end of the mask mandate.

"I'm glad about it ending for children, since I didn't think it was fair they were carrying the burden of our failure to control the spread," Krug said.

But Krug, a North Plains resident whose job involves daily face-to-face interactions with different people, said she'll likely continue wearing a mask.

Krug said her three children — an elementary schooler, middle schooler and high schooler in Hillsboro public schools — have never loved wearing masks.

"But now that the prospect is on the table that they can take them off, possibly next week, they're not thrilled about that idea," Krug said. "(They) just feel really cautious about it."

Both Krug and Aimee Wood, a parent of two Tigard-Tualatin School District students, said they had told their kids that they could decide whether to continue masking or not. But Wood said she doubts her family will continue wearing masks — unless a new variant comes or case numbers start to rise.

"They've been wearing masks, which I supported when the case numbers were high, but based on where



Interim Principal Landon Braden hands a face mask to second-grader Skylynn Adams at Enterprise Elementary School in September 2021.

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the numbers are right now in Oregon and our county, I think it makes sense to remove them," Wood said.

Liberals were four times more likely than conservatives to say they were "very concerned" with hospitals in their region not having enough beds for everyone requiring hospitalization.

As of Thursday, March 10, Northwest Oregon had 276 adult ICU beds occupied and 46 beds open.

As of last week there were 300 COVID-19 patients hospitalized across Oregon, with 55 in ICUs.

Wood said she wasn't at all concerned with hospital capacity as of early March, but had been at previous points over the past two years, like last August and September when the delta

variant was surging.

Bryan Hadley, a Medford resident with only his youngest child still in school, said he was glad the mask mandate was ending but wished it had ended sooner.

"I feel it's about time," Hadley said. "My personal opinions are that we should have our own choice whether to do it or not. If people want to mask up, that's totally fine. And if they don't, that's totally fine."

Hadley also has an older child at home who is at high risk for a more serious case of COVID-19, so he said his family has been cautious about that and was previously more concerned about hospital capacity.

Daily new COVID-19 cases and the test positivity rate have dropped since Jan-

MORE INFORMATION

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center is committed to the highest level of public opinion research. To help obtain that, the nonprofit is building a large research panel of Oregonians to ensure that all voices are represented in discussions of public policy in a valid and statistically reliable way. Selected panelists earn points for their participation, which can be redeemed for cash or donated to a charity. To learn more visit oregonvbc.org/about-the-panel.

uary, the most recent surge, with fewer than 500 cases per day, as of the week of March 11.

Those numbers represent a steep drop from the first weeks of 2022, when an average of more than 7,700 cases were reported each day.

La Nina expected to stick through summer

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

SALEM — The reigning La Nina has more staying power than expected and likely will stay through the spring and into the summer, influencing U.S. temperatures and precipitation for the upcoming months, the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center says.

The Pacific Ocean cooled in early March, strengthening a La Nina that formed last summer and had been expected to fade in the spring. Compared to a month ago, chances are nearly double that the La Nina will still prevail in June, July and August, according to the climate center.

While a La Nina can worsen drought in the southern tier of the U.S., it's linked to cool and wet weather in the Northwest.

Washington State Climatologist Nick Bond said the continuing La Nina could help the snowpack have a spring resurgence. The statewide snowpack has been dropping this month and was down to 85% of average on Friday, March 11.

"Our mountains should do pretty well," Bond said. "I wouldn't be surprised that in a month people, not necessarily in agriculture, are grousing that the spring is really cold and wet."

In February, the climate center gave the La Nina a 27% chance of persisting through the summer. Now, the center rates the chances at 53%.

Bond said a La Nina has more effect on Washington winters than summers.

"By the time you get to summer, there are some impacts, but they are weaker," he said. "I'm not sure it's going to be that big of a deal."

In the short term, the National Weather Service predicted Friday that Washington, Oregon and Idaho will be cooler and wetter than average over the next two weeks. Northern California's weather will be near normal, the service predicted.

As expected during a La Nina, Washington's snowpack was strong early in the winter and was 107% of normal on Jan. 1. It declined to 95% of normal by March 1, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The snowpack typically peaks in April. It's been falling behind average all month.

NRCS water supply specialist Scott Pattee said Friday that he's not optimistic the snowpack will recover and get back to average.

"You can't really rule anything out, but I think the odds are pretty slim," he said.

Bond said that even if La Nina drops snow at high elevations, it may not provide much relief for low-elevation parts of Central and Eastern Washington that remain in severe or extreme drought.

"Some places that are more in trouble now don't necessarily do as great during La Nina," he said.

Drought grips the entire West. Some 50% of Washington is in drought, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported March 10. Eight other Western states are suffering more.

Some 90% of Oregon and 100% of California are in a drought. Drought covers 84% of Idaho.

The climate center will issue a new seasonal outlook for April, May and June on March 17. The ocean-surface temperatures that trigger a La Nina — or its opposite, an El Nino — drive the three-month forecasts.

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