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Photos by Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

A student picks out his locker at the new Astoria Middle School building during an open house on Wednesday.

Back to school in another abnormal year

Parents struggle to decide what's best for children

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

At the last minute, Tania Regier's daughter decided her desire to see her friends outweighed her dislike of wearing a mask to school.

Regier's three children spent much of the last school year enrolled in the Warrenton-Hammond School District's online academy. For her family, it felt safer and — as shifting coronavirus case metrics dictated how and when schools were able to open for in-person classes — more predictable.

This year, two of Regier's children will return to classes in Warrenton school buildings.

It's a decision Regier left largely up them, but it was an uncomfortable call — a discomfort she knows she shares with other parents who debated whether to send their kids back to in-person school.

Virus case numbers rose sharply in Clatsop County over the summer with the arrival of the highly contagious delta variant, and the number of COVID-related hospitalizations and deaths ticked upward. At the same time, parents and educators grappled with growing concerns about the students left behind in online classrooms, the difficulty in teaching young students from behind a mask, and other issues associated with trying to educate during a pandemic.

"As parents, our general consensus is we don't know," Regier said. "We don't know what we don't know. We're all hoping we made the best decision, but we don't know."

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'AS PARENTS, OUR GENERAL CONSENSUS IS WE DON'T KNOW. WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE DON'T KNOW. WE'RE ALL HOPING WE MADE THE BEST DECISION, BUT WE DON'T KNOW.'

Tania Regier | parent of Warrenton students



Eighth grader Eva Henley checks in and tours the new Astoria Middle School building on Wednesday ahead of the first day of school.

CORONAVIRUS

Deaths tied to care homes

Six deaths detailed in state outbreak report

By ERICK BENGEL
The Astorian

Six of the coronavirus deaths recorded in Clatsop County this summer were tied to care homes, which were identified early in the pandemic as among the most vulnerable to the spread of the virus.

Five of the deaths were residents at Clatsop Care Memory Community in Warrenton, where 37 virus cases have been reported since early August. The other death was a resident at Neawanna By The Sea in Seaside, where there have been four virus cases since mid-August.

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Knappa preschool shuts down over virus

New program closed until Sept. 20

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

A new preschool program at the Knappa School District has shut down until Sept. 20 after a student tested positive for the coronavirus.

The school district was also told another preschool student was considered a close contact in a separate virus case.

The preschool closure impacts 18 children who were enrolled in the Knappa Early Learning program, which launched on Sept. 1.

Precise contact tracing would have been difficult. With the way the program is run and given how preschoolers interact with each other, anybody could have been in contact with anybody else, Superintendent Bill Fritz noted.

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County looks to improve broadband in Jewell

A three-phase plan to expand internet access

By ERICK BENGEL
The Astorian

Clatsop County may partner with Jewell School District to bring broadband to a rural region of the county where internet service is slow, spotty and often nonexistent.

At Wednesday's county Board of Commissioners work session,

Steve Phillips, the Jewell superintendent, proposed hiring the firm Oregon Coast Wireless, which upgraded internet service in Tillamook County.

Before Phillips took a lead role in addressing the inferior internet in Jewell and Elsie, the county had worked with a consultant on the issue and stakeholders had weighed in.

Tillamook and Clatsop counties both have sparsely populated areas with weak internet service, Phillips noted, and he argued that what worked in Tillamook could work in Clatsop.

Jewell's main internet provider is CenturyLink, which won't accept

new customers in the area, Phillips said. "Frankly, the service they do provide is hit-and-miss because they're so maxed out," he said.

Less than 40% of people in that part of the county enjoy reliable internet, according to a 2020 survey of Jewell School District families. "It's tough out here," Phillips said.

He estimates that, if the community follows Tillamook's model, the cost of internet per home will fall in the \$65-a-month range. Residents in Jewell and Elsie typically pay between \$80 and \$120 a month, he said.

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Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Rural areas in Clatsop County often suffer from the lack of reliable internet.



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