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OUR VIEW

Harsh winter cracks thin ice that schools are skating on

Eastern Oregonians have been snowed in for much of the winter, which means that local students have been snowed out of their classrooms.

Schools from Lone to Elgin have been hammered by ice and snow and freezing fog, causing them to cancel days of class time and shorten others.

Teachers are scrambling to figure out how to deal with the issue, choosing between lopping off chapters from this semester's curricula or loading their students up with work they missed due to weather. Administrators, school boards, teachers' unions and the state education department are scrambling, too.

There are no good options when Mother Nature throws a wrench in things. But the priority cannot be anything other than education, and everyone should keep that in mind when discussing what steps to take to get out of this hole.

A clear problem in Oregon is how many school districts, when laying out their schedule, skate on dangerously thin ice just above the minimum legal requirements of instructional time — even though Oregon's instructional time requirements are the lowest in the country.

If anything goes wrong in the school year — an unusually harsh winter, a busted pipe, or a collapsed roof — the district can quickly drop below legal requirements. This is bad planning, though of course financial realities and union negotiations can force that hand. But padding some additional time into the school year, right from the get-go, would help most emergency situations. Worst case scenario — no school is missed and Oregon children spend more time in a classroom, though likely still below the national average.

Once the schedule allows for a few unforeseen circumstances,

we have to be smart should those unforeseen circumstances occur.

It sure seems foolish for Hermiston and Pendleton to both have a day off this week for an in-service day, wasting a chance to make up a day of missed class time. We support valuable teacher development time, and know that educators with better training add value to each class hour, but many parents are scratching their heads about keeping their kids home on a clear day after a winter riddled with cancellations.

On Thursday, the Oregon Department of Education approved a temporary rule to allow schools to opt out of 14 hours of state-mandated instructional time. It won't make up all the hours lost at most local districts, but it helps lessen the hill most districts had to overcome to arrive back at the minimum instructional hours.

Some school districts, such as Hermiston, have already taken action, pushing their graduation back a week. Sure, it causes problems and will upset some parents and students, but as we said above there are no perfect options. And we're in favor of most options that get class time back to legal requirements, be it lengthening the school day, adding days to the end of the year or reducing in-session, non-instructional time.

Pendleton School District has yet to take action to make up the missing time. The district is surveying parents, staff and community members as to how they think the district should go about it. Other school boards are considering their options as well.

Oregon has to do better when it comes to education. We're below average compared to most states. And if we're doing the bare minimum right now we sure can't afford to go any lower, no matter the weather.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Improving Oregon's transparency

The (Corvallis) Gazette-Times

One of the interesting sidelights in this year's legislative session will be the fate of a proposal to create a public records ombudsman. The idea is that the ombudsman's office would help mediate disputes between state agencies and members of the public requesting public records.

Now, your first question might well be this: Why would such an office be necessary? Don't public records belong to, well, members of the public? Shouldn't state agencies consistently be bending over backward to help citizens access those records?

To be fair, there are agencies where that occurs on a regular basis. But the overall picture is not as bright as it should be — and the number of instances in which a government bureaucracy has blocked legitimate requests for records or has charged unrealistic fees is on the rise, and has been for years.

The idea for the ombudsman is the work of a public task force that has been laboring for more than a year on overhauling the state's records laws. It's been challenging work; the task force had hoped, for example, to examine the 500 or so exemptions to the public records law that have cropped up in the decades since 1973, when Oregon enacted a law that was at the time considered among the best in the nation.

That's no longer the case, a realization that helped pave the way for Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum to create the task force in the first place. But it became clear to task force members that the work of examining the

exemptions will take some time.

So, in the meantime, the task force has recommended some smaller steps, including the idea of creating the ombudsman. A bill pending before the 2017 Legislature, Senate Bill 106, does just that, creating a position that will be called the "public records advocate."

Let's be clear: This isn't the huge breakthrough in access to public records that Oregon citizens deserve. For starters, the advocate position would not have the authority to compel release of records, but it potentially would have the ability to work with citizens to mediate solutions to records disputes.

After initially proposing that the office be housed in the office of the secretary of state, Gov. Kate Brown recently suggested that the office be placed in the Department of Administrative Services. There's a critical problem there: The director of that department reports to the governor.

Why would Brown, a Democrat, change her tune about where the advocate should be located? The November elections may offer a clue: Voters chose Republican Dennis Richardson as secretary of state.

But Brown, who has talked about the need to increase public confidence in state government, needs to shrug off whatever political concerns she might have and stick with the original plan.

Let's be blunt: It's more effective if the governor doesn't have direct authority over the position. In a legislative session that increasingly seems defined by hard partisan lines, it will be interesting to watch this issue play out.

WHICH "ILLEGAL" SHOULD OREGON'S LAW ENFORCEMENT SPEND ITS LIMITED TIME & RESOURCES TRACKING DOWN?



OTHER VIEWS

The politics of cowardice

This is a column directed at high school and college students. I'm going to try to convey to you how astoundingly different the Republican Party felt when I was your age.

The big guy then was Ronald Reagan. Temperamentally, though not politically, Reagan was heir to the two Roosevelts. He inherited a love of audacity from TR and optimism and charm from FDR.

He had a sunny faith in America's destiny and in America's ability to bend global history toward freedom. He had a sunny faith in the free market to deliver prosperity to all. He had a sunny faith in the power of technology to deliver bounty and even protect us from nuclear missiles.

He could be very hard on big government or the Soviet Union, but he generally saw the world as a welcoming place; he looked for the good news in others and saw the arc of history bending toward progress.

When he erred it was often on the utopian side of things, believing that tax cuts could pay for themselves, believing that he and Mikhail Gorbachev could shed history and eliminate all nuclear weapons.

The mood of the party is so different today. Donald Trump expressed the party's new mood to David Muir of ABC, when asked about his decision to suspend immigration from some Muslim countries: "The world is a mess. The world is as angry as it gets. What, you think this is going to cause a little more anger? The world is an angry place."

Consider the tenor of Trump's first week in office. It's all about threat perception. He has made moves to build a wall against the Mexican threat, to build barriers against the Muslim threat, to end a trade deal with Asia to fight the foreign economic threat, to build black site torture chambers against the terrorist threat.

Trump is on his political honeymoon, which should be a moment of joy and promise. But he seems to suffer from an angry form of anhedonia, the inability to experience happiness. Instead of savoring the moment, he's spent the week in a series of nasty squabbles about his ratings and crowd sizes.

If Reagan's dominant emotional note was optimism, Trump's is fear. If Reagan's optimism was expansive, Trump's fear propels him to close in: Pull in from Asian entanglements through rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Pull in from European entanglements by disparaging NATO. It's not a cowering, timid fear; it's more a dark, resentful porcupine fear.

We have a word for people who are dominated by fear. We call them cowards.



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

Trump was not a coward in the business or campaign worlds. He could take on enormous debt and had the audacity to appear at televised national debates with no clue what he was talking about. But as president his is a policy of cowardice. On every front, he wants to shrink the country into a shell. J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, "A man that flies from his fear may find that he has only taken a shortcut to meet it."

Desperate to be liked, Trump adopts a combative attitude that makes him unlikable. Terrified of Mexican criminals, he wants to build a wall that will actually lock in more undocumented aliens than it will keep out.

Terrified of Muslim terrorists, he embraces the torture policies guaranteed to mobilize terrorists. Terrified that U.S. business can't compete with Asian business, he closes off a trade deal that would have boosted annual real incomes in the United States by \$131 billion, or 0.5 percent of GDP. Terrified of Mexican competition, he considers slapping a 20 percent tariff

on Mexican goods, even though U.S. exports to Mexico have increased 97 percent since 2005.

Trump has changed the way the Republican Party sees the world. Republicans used to have a basic faith in the dynamism and openness of the free market. Now the party fears openness and competition.

In summer 2015, according to a Pew Research Center poll, Republicans said free trade deals had been good for the country by 51 to 39 percent. By summer 2016, Republicans said those deals had been bad for America by 61 percent to 32 percent.

It's not that the deals had changed, or reality. It was that Donald Trump became the Republican nominee and his dark fearfulness became the party's dark fearfulness. In this case fear is not a reaction to the world. It is a way of seeing the world. It propels your reactions to the world.

As Reagan came to office he faced refugee crises, with suffering families coming in from Cuba, Vietnam and Cambodia. Filled with optimism and confidence, Reagan vowed, "We shall seek new ways to integrate refugees into our society," and he delivered on that promise.

Trump faces a refugee crisis from Syria. And though no Syrian-American has ever committed an act of terrorism on American soil, Trump's response is fear. Shut them out.

Students, the party didn't used to be this way. A mean wind is blowing.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in 2003. He has been a senior editor at The Weekly Standard and is currently a commentator on PBS.

YOUR VIEWS

Hammonds deserve pardons and to be sent back home

The Hammonds should be home with their families.

Seventy-four-year-old Dwight and son Steven were/are respected ranchers in the Burns area. They are presently serving a five year mandatory sentence for arson on federal land. They were labeled terrorists in order to justify this grossly disproportionate sentence for the destruction (burning) of approximately 130 acres of BLM pasture.

They stood trial once and served their time. The DOJ came back in federal appeals court and won reinstating the five year sentence. Double jeopardy is mentioned often as I have read the articles reporting the trial and happenings that led to the final outcome, which to me is a gross miscarriage of justice.

Mandatory five year sentencing is to discourage terrorists and arsonists who disregard the law. Was this a witch hunt used to send a message to good solid Americans

that dissent? Could be; maybe yes.

The Hammonds have been described in such terms as respected, great neighbor, salt of the earth ag folks. If this father and son fit the profile of arsonist or terrorist, we are all in trouble. "Remember this is not about me, this is about our country," were Dwight Hammond's parting comments as he was taken from home and family a year ago.

For goodness sakes, someone has the leverage to get these men out of prison. Unfortunately for the Hammonds, I think they were caught up in what I refer to as "a virus sweep."

Easily labeled as such if you have issues with the BLM and their land management policies. I'm infuriated to see the pardons and commutations being dished out at this time, drug dealers and terrorists, but none seem to be forthcoming for Dwight and Steven.

Bring the Hammonds home.

Wanda Ballard
Baker City

LETTERS POLICY

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