

Schools: 'Right now it's 35 square feet per student in a classroom space'

Continued from Page A1

governor announced that individual districts, rather than state officials, would make the final decision in whether to offer in-person instruction.

Back then, about 50,000 students in public schools were regularly visiting classrooms and getting face time with teachers. By the end of last week, that number had risen to 136,000 — about 1 in 4 of the state's public school students.

"All public schools will operate delivering in-person instruction through either a fully on-site or a hybrid instructional model, while continuing to follow the mandatory health and safety guidance from RSSL [Ready Schools, Safe Learners]," Brown wrote in a letter addressed to the leaders of the Oregon Health Authority and the Oregon Department of Education.

According to the Oregon Department of Education, almost 700 schools were operating in either a hybrid instructional model, which includes some in-person instruction, or a fully on-site model as of Feb. 27. The majority of schools — and students — in Oregon are still in comprehensive distance learning, with some small groups receiving limited in-person instruction.

Most Eastern Oregon schools had already brought back at least their youngest grades back to the classroom,



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Elementary students wear masks and sit in alternating desks during in-person instruction at the Echo School on Feb. 2, 2021.

however. Some, like Stanfield School District, had the space to bring all students back for full days while still maintaining social distancing and small cohorts of students. Others have been offering a hybrid schedule, with students divided into two groups and going for half days or every other day.

Hermiston School District had previously announced that it planned to return middle school students to the classroom for half days starting March 22 and high school students on April 12,

which would meet the governor's deadlines. Kindergarten through third grade students have already returned, and fourth and fifth grade students will transition to a hybrid schedule on Monday, March 8.

Superintendent Tricia Mooney said the governor's announcement is a "step in the right direction" toward bringing all Oregon students back, and it has been exciting for Hermiston School District staff to see some students back in the classroom already. She pointed to the state-

ment in Brown's letter to OHA and ODE directing them to provide updated safety guidance to districts by no later than March 19, and said those updates to regulations, such as how many students are allowed in a cohort, will play into the district's plans for bringing secondary students back.

In Pendleton, students in K-5 schools had already returned to in-person classes on Feb. 22, and in a statement on Thursday, March 4, Superintendent Chris Fritsch said the district is "plan-

ning to return our secondary students using a hybrid model on Monday, March 29."

Fritsch said Brown's announcement will not make any major changes to that timeline, as the original plans already fall in line with what the governor announced. He added that the school district is waiting to hear from state officials if this announcement will alter any particulars, such as physical distancing guidelines, which he said is a major barrier for bringing all students back full time.

"Right now it's 35 square

feet per student in a classroom space," he said. "And until that changes, for a lot of us, we wouldn't be able to bring all students back and have them all in the classroom at the same time."

Fritsch said he expects to hear more details from state officials next week about how the governor's recent announcement will affect Pendleton schools.

Leaders of Oregon's teachers union responded to the announcement with a nuanced message, expressing support for a return to in-person learning, but repeating their emphasis on safety precautions.

"We hear, understand, and share the frustration expressed by many in our communities about the uncertainty this pandemic has caused for our public education system," said the statement signed by dozens of local union presidents, "and the long-standing educational disparities that continue to be exacerbated by reopening plans that fail to truly center student equity."

The union message calls on leaders in school districts where agreements haven't been reached to continue bargaining "in good faith with local educators to craft plans that will truly serve all of our students."

Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter Elizabeth Miller and Oregonian reporter Eder Campuzano contributed to this report.

Crisis:

Continued from Page A1

days, a workload that used to represent a month's worth of activity.

Elaine Anderson, a sales manager for Guild Mortgage Co. in Pendleton, has also noticed a considerable uptick in business. Anderson said low interest rates on home loans has helped drive the increased demand on the housing market. The market is so competitive that Farley has encouraged his clients to be sure about their offers, because it may be their only chance.

Farley and others in the real estate industry said they don't expect the market to slacken until Pendleton's housing stock grows.

It's a problem for both renters and homebuyers, even as Pendleton is showing signs of progress.

Progress on the horizon?

The city of Pendleton issued 77 housing permits last year, a 10-year high. Excluding manufactured homes, the housing units had a total value of \$10.3 million, also a high mark. But Pendleton was seemingly on the cusp of adding hundreds of more units than that, and some of the large projects the city has been directly involved in have been slow to get off the ground.

The city reached a deal with I & E Construction of Wilsonville to build a 200-unit apartment complex on Westgate two years ago. Tim Simons, the city's community development director, said the developer is still working on lining up financing for the project and could break ground this summer.

In early 2020, the city approved a tax abatement deal with the new owner of the old U.S. Forest Service building on Southwest Hailey Avenue. Simons said the project was delayed when the developer switched architects, but it's still in progress.

The city is also involved in two affordable housing projects: an 80-unit complex off of Tutuilla Road and a 70-unit project on South Hill. The former is where some of the rehousing money was redirected and flood survivors will be given preference when rentals open up.

Large, single-family developments have been harder to come by, but Simons said he hears regularly from devel-

opers interested in some of the private tracts of land that could be used for subdivisions.

Despite the continuing need for new housing, Pendleton Mayor John Turner said he didn't see a need to deviate from the city council's housing goals, which has been set at 50 housing permits per year since 2017. Citing the various housing projects in development, he anticipates hundreds of new housing units will go on the market over the next two years.

Turner said Pendleton isn't unique in its need for housing, an issue that's felt nationally.

Banica, the manager at Pendleton Title, said she's heard from title companies across the region that they're seeing the same trend as Pendleton.

Hermiston defines its own approach to housing needs

When it comes to building new housing, Pendleton city officials have long pointed out the disadvantages their city has in contrast to its neighbor to the west. In comparison to Hermiston's sandy soil and flat topography, Pendleton's rocky ground and sloped surfaces makes building new homes more difficult.

Hermiston saw a housing boomlet of its own in 2020, issuing 101 housing permits last year. Unlike Pendleton, all of them were single-family dwellings.

Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said the city has honed its focus on how to make the process easier for developers. Morgan said initiatives like partnering with Umatilla County on building a new water tower and rezoning some industrial land put Hermiston in a position to attract development.

"Now, when you have a massive shift in mortgage rates, that has allowed the private sector to strike while the iron's hot," he said. "If we were just trying to scramble and work with developers to chase historically low interest rates, we would have missed had we been starting from scratch. All the work over the past several years has allowed the city to springboard off the historically low interest rates."

Morgan said Hermiston is aware that the housing market is continuing to shrink across the country, but it's hopeful its approach of providing public infrastructure to developers will continue to pay off.

East Oregonian reporter Bryce Dole contributed to this report.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Volunteers check eligibility and distribute information to those seeking a COVID-19 vaccine at the Pendleton Convention Center on Jan. 28, 2021.

Vaccine: 'It really isn't an apples to apples comparison'

Continued from Page A1

Fiumara, the email only listed eight counties, and Umatilla County was the one left out.

"We thought that was the new (weekly) floor for us," Fiumara said. He added that the typo was "frustrating" and "disappointing."

Such meager allocations have caused the county to fall in recent weeks to some of the lowest vaccination rates statewide, officials have said.

Approximately 1,006 county residents have been vaccinated per 10,000 people as of Friday, March 5, ranked last in the state, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority.

"Us and our partners in the county have been pretty good at kicking our vaccine out as of seven days of having received it," Fiumara said. "There's been a few instances where it's taken the second week to get rid of some stragglers, but we've pretty much kicked it out pretty fast. We just haven't received enough" doses.

In response to the low totals, county officials earlier this week sent a letter to Gov. Kate Brown's office, claiming the state was failing at its promises to focus vaccine distribution toward vulnerable minority communities where infection has spread disproportionately.

"This is not due to a lack of capacity to vaccinate our residents. We have never



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A vial of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine sits alongside syringes at a Umatilla County Public Health drive-thru vaccination clinic at the Pendleton Convention Center on Jan. 28, 2021.

even tapped the upper limits of our vaccine allocations," the letter says. "While equity is high on Oregon's agenda, this is an embarrassing and inexcusable contradiction."

New vaccines incoming

But there is reason to hope that things will soon begin to shift, Fiumara said. The county has a significant population of essential workers who will soon become eligible for the vaccine, which "in theory" should make it so the state allocates more doses toward the county, Fiumara said.

In addition, several new county businesses are to receive doses in the coming weeks, including Bi-Mart, Walmart and Rite Aid. Both Safeway and Mirasol Family Health Center are also expected to see larger shipments of vaccines than they

have previously, Fiumara said.

The doses sent to those facilities are in addition to the 900 doses sent from the state to the county health department, he added.

"All of that is way more than we've been getting," Fiumara said.

The county this week also received its first shipment of 100 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine — a single-dose vaccine with an efficacy rate of 72% against moderate and severe cases.

Due to its effectiveness compared to that of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine, which are each over 90% effective, some people have voiced skepticism about the new Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Experts say that comparing these numbers is problematic. The trials were held at different places at different times where infection

was spreading at different rates. That makes it difficult to judge if the lower percent is genuinely due to the product or the environment.

"It really isn't an apples to apples comparison," Fiumara said, adding that the efficacy rate for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is still very high compared to a common flu shot. "And I know that makes it really tough for folks to understand."

The new vaccine can also be stored in normal refrigeration for months, and because it is a one-shot immunization, health officials nationally have expressed enthusiasm that it will help the vaccine rollout immensely. Trials also showed the vaccine prevented 100 percent of hospitalizations and deaths related to COVID-19.

Fiumara said local Bi-Marts are now receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and health officials are now working with the businesses to help with their scheduling and procedures.

"For now, it has been approved with really good effectiveness rates, especially against severe illness," Fiumara said. "Any way you look at any of these (vaccines), they are far better than anything a year ago we thought we would have."

In all, 8,169 Umatilla County residents have been vaccinated, with 4,743 having received their second dose, according to state data.