

## OUR VIEW

# Mandate thrusts schools into spotlight

Last week, our school-age children and youth were once again thrust into center of the COVID-19 pandemic when Gov. Kate Brown ordered new mask mandates for K-12 students.

Our students shouldn't be there. Nor should our teachers and administrators.

Yet, they are and while it is disappointing and creates new questions about local control, the governor's decision was the right one — for now.

Still, the new mandates potentially push students and teachers and administrators into the middle of what is essentially a cultural/political debate regarding vaccinations and the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is also the risk that many parents — for various reasons — will keep their students away from education centers because they do not agree with the mask mandate. If so, that doesn't help in our collective effort to provide our youth with the best education possible.

Another piece that complicates this new paradigm is that many children are still ineligible to be vaccinated.

Last week, Intermountain Education Service District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said the new mask mandate puts schools "in the crosshairs" of an issue that has polarized America. He rightly was concerned about how much more pressure will be placed on teachers and school administrators to enforce a new mask requirement.

Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney's suggestion that communities will need to work together to support students was probably the best advice for a situation that is unprecedented, complicated and frustrating.

As a community, regardless of where we stand on vaccinations and masks, we should work to be as helpful as possible to our local schools.

We need to remember that the teachers, superintendents and other school officials are not responsible for the mask mandate. They, like all state agencies, must obey the orders of the governor. They don't have the option to ignore her mandate.

That means trying to push them into the center of a political/cultural debate about COVID-19 and vaccinations is wrong and won't solve the basic problem.

Our students and their teachers should not be in the middle of this debate. However, as cases climb, and vaccination rates continue to lag, we now face a new COVID-19 crisis. No one wants to return to the draconian restrictions instituted by the governor last year. We must all work hard to ensure we do not.

Meanwhile, we must give our local school districts, teachers and administrators all the help we can as they struggle to work through, yet another COVID-19 challenge.



## Watching the signs, learning from the past



DANIEL  
WATTENBURGER  
HOMEGROWN

It used to be that darkness blotting out the midday sun was considered a bad omen. Now it's called late summer.

Smoke has been slowly but steadily filtering into our skies over the past few weeks, and on Sunday I caught my first real whiff of the scorched odor now synonymous with the season. It brought back the unpleasant memories of a year ago when the realities of the pandemic, second-stage cabin fever, and wildfire smoke were all settling in at about the same time.

Everything was tinged apocalyptic. The skies were filled with fine ash from devastating wildfires, COVID-19 illnesses and deaths had reached their first peak in Umatilla County, and our sense of community was faltering.

That framework of "community," the events and gatherings and accidental meetings and impromptu conversations that keep us connected to one another, are crucial to appreciating one another for both our uniqueness and our commonalities. But we all spent more time in smaller circles last year, losing opportunities to grow a network of understanding and support.

Middle-to-late 2020 isn't the kind of

season anyone would want to repeat. It fostered fear and anger and distrust. It left scars that won't fade quickly.

But in many ways, we're still living in it. It feels duller because we've gotten used to a lot of things while changing our expectations and routines to fit new realities. We've adjusted to the malaise.

I suppose I shouldn't assume everyone shares my restlessness. It could be attributed to those smaller social circles I mentioned earlier and my inability to see a brighter picture. Maybe there are many people who are feeling optimistic about our path forward. I would love to hear more from them.

But from my viewpoint, we've accepted that the sun will disappear behind a veil of noxious burnt sienna for weeks or even months at a time. For some of our children, that's the way it's always been. Most of us still remember when the sky was blue on the first day of school.

We've sweated out a historic heat wave that killed more than 100 here in Oregon, and none of us will be surprised to see the temperature or body count records fall again before the decade is over.

We've tossed aside the social contract, the idea that by each giving a little we can add to the greater good. There is no argument stronger than "you can't make me" in our discourse, and it's usually the final word.

We've diluted potential solutions because they require consensus. Our current COVID-19 situation shows this in stark detail.

The vaccine, a marvel of modern science and medicine, had the potential to protect the entire country in a matter of months and virtually remove the danger of serious illness and death for most Americans. Instead, we're plowing through another wave of illness and turmoil while the readily available solution sits on the shelf.

You can apply that to any number of issues. We have the knowledge and resources to make things better, if only incrementally, but lack the collective will.

I don't know what the future holds, but it can't be a good sign that the billionaires are all trying to find a way out of here.

It won't get easier if the rest of us fight each other every step of the way or continue to break into increasingly isolated factions. We are going to have more big challenges to contend with, and we'll have to agree that we can only survive them by working together.

We should be paying more attention to the omens and signs around us.

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## YOUR VIEWS

### To our unvaccinated neighbors

To all our neighbors and friends who have decided not to get vaccinated: Thank you for occupying, or getting ready to occupy, our local hospitals. According to the East Oregonian, half the current cases at St. Anthony Hospital are non-vaccinated persons. St. Anthony has been turning away critically ill persons or have tried to find other facilities to accommodate them. I hope your loved one doesn't need their services because the chances are they may not get it.

So again, thank you for your selfishness in not getting vaccinated. This is not political. It is science and vaccinating saves lives.

Dave Frye  
Pendleton

### Pendleton, get the jab!

The community is celebrating a return to the new normal this summer.

Restaurants are open. People gather to enjoy music on Wednesday evenings at Roy Raley Park. "Let's Get Wild in Pendleton" brings people downtown on Saturday evenings for fun and connection. Houses of worship see more and more people returning to in-person services.

The community calendar is filled with events that were sorely missed in 2020. The Pendleton Whisky Music Fest brought people together from near and far. Everyone looked forward to the HotRod-A-Rama. The renowned Pendleton Round-Up promises to be a highlight of the year.

However, the COVID-19 delta variant, increasing infection rates and low vaccination numbers, puts all of these beloved community events at risk. Closer to home, many of our neighbors are unable to be vaccinated due to their age or medical condition. No one in the community wants to bear the responsibility for passing the virus to a child or a vulnerable neighbor. The clearest way to avoid this scenario is to get vacci-

nated if you are able to do so.

The scientific data shows that the COVID-19 vaccine is the best way to keep one another safe. The shot is highly effective. It has few side effects.

Of course, every American has the freedom and the right to refuse to be vaccinated, but doesn't our responsibility to care for one another and our community call each of us to a higher mandate for the greater good? We are urging everyone to set aside political agendas and to reject misinformation and unfounded fears. Please get the shot if you are able — for your own sake, for the sake of your friends and neighbors, and for the health our entire community.

Pendleton, we can beat COVID-19 together! Take care of yourself. Take care of your neighbors. If you are able to get the shot, please do so as soon as possible.

Rev. Karyn Dix, Rev. Ann Marie Hardin, Rev. Travis Larsen, Rev. Scott Little, Rev. Jonathan Mitchell, Pastor Patty Nance, Rev. Charlotte Wells  
Pendleton

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