

**INSIDE**

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## LEARNING CURVE

### As schools restart, so do COVID-19 outbreaks

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
*East Oregonian*

UMATILLA COUNTY — The continued surge in new COVID-19 cases in Umatilla County is beginning to take a toll on the local education system.

On Wednesday, Sept. 29, Blue Mountain Community College announced it was putting its Pendleton campus under quarantine, moving all classes and services online through Oct. 13. The BMCC campuses in Hermiston, Boardman, Milton-Freewater and Baker City remain fully open.

In an interview, BMCC President Mark Browning said college leaders made the decision after a staff member tested positive for the virus.

"It's the safest thing to do," he said.

According to Browning, the staff member got tested after learning they had been exposed to someone who already tested positive for COVID-19. Their test came back positive on Sept. 28, despite being vaccinated and asymptomatic. Browning said it is Blue Mountain's only confirmed case, but the college wanted to quarantine the campus to prevent any further spread and sanitize its facilities.

The county's two largest K-12 school districts have avoided a large-scale return to distance learning, but they still are feeling the impacts of COVID-19.

In the Pendleton School District, Superintendent Chris Fritsch said the district is experiencing an uptick in students in quarantine after Round-Up week, which the district has typically granted students and staff as a day off. In a Sept. 28 interview, Fritsch said 125 students were in quarantine, either because they had tested positive for COVID-19 or because they had been exposed to the virus. The Oregon Health Authority issues weekly reports on outbreaks in schools, and its most



A "building quarantine notice" on Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2021, adorns the doors of Morrow Hall at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton. A staff member at the campus tested positive for COVID-19, prompting BMCC leaders earlier that day to move all classes and services online through Oct. 13.

Photos by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

recent report from Sept. 22, documented eight Pendleton students and two staff as contracting COVID-19 since the start of the school year.

Still, Fritsch said he thinks the beginning of the school year has gone well considering Pendleton started its school year as COVID-19 was peaking around the state. The quarantined students represent about 5% of Pendleton's student body, and students are sent home with laptops so they can continue their schoolwork. No classes or buildings have been shut down completely because of an outbreak, Fritsch said.

In talks with Umatilla County Public Health, Fritsch said most student cases were being traced back to their households.

Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney said she hadn't had the chance to check with the public health department about the origins of her district's cases, but the county's largest school district also has the county's most cases, recording 36 student cases and seven staff cases, according to the Sept. 22 Oregon Health Authority report.

Based on attendance reports, Mooney estimated the number of students that have come down with the virus is much higher. But Hermiston also has avoided shutting down classes or schools, Mooney said.

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Teacher Jacey Wilson, right, leads her fourth-grade class on Aug. 31, 2021, at Sherwood Heights Elementary School in Pendleton. The Pendleton School District had 129 students in COVID-19 quarantine as of Tuesday, Sept. 28, according to Superintendent Chris Fritsch.

## Cases tied to rodeo continue to climb

By BRYCE DOLE AND GARY A. WARNER  
*EO Media Group*

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday, Sept. 28, she was "gravely concerned" about an alarming spike in COVID-19 cases across Eastern Oregon with a common factor — the Pendleton Round-Up.

During a morning press call, Brown and state health officials gave an upbeat update on the state's efforts against the highly contagious delta variant of COVID-19. Statewide, the COVID-19 surge of late summer and early fall "appears to have reached its peak," said deputy state epidemiologist Dr. Tom Jeanne.

Brown hailed the state's efforts in curbing new infections and hospitalizations as the state appeared to descend from a two-month spike in cases that set new pandemic records in Oregon.

It was only during a question and answer period at the end of the presentation that the Pendleton Round-Up spike was addressed as a sour point in the state's progress.

County and tribal health officials reported Sept. 27 the spike in COVID-19 cases in Umatilla County had been tied to the annual rodeo event held Sept. 15-18.

At least 95 COVID-19 cases have been traced back to the event and all its venues, up from 49 Sept. 27 and 68 Sept. 28, according to Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara. And health officials across Eastern Oregon are reporting a surge in cases.

"That was a very large outdoor event," Jeanne said of the Round-Up. "And there may not have been great compliance with masking there. We do expect to see some impact on cases from that, but it's still too early to know the full extent of that."

Umatilla County reported 167 COVID-19 cases on Sept. 28, more than any other county in Oregon. The county's total set a new pandemic record for cases reported in a single day and brought average daily cases to the highest levels since the pandemic started.

CHI St. Anthony in Pendleton and Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston reported they are seeing more patients hospitalized with COVID-19.

A spokesperson with Good Shepherd said in an email that nine people had been admitted to the hospital with COVID-19 over the past week, a "slight increase" from the previous week. A spokesperson with St. Anthony said six people were hospitalized with COVID-19 as of Sept. 28, adding "we are pretty full, but not to the brim from what I understand."

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## Oregon redistricting fight is over, but fallout might linger

### Republicans try and fail to censure Kotek for breaking her promise

By DIRK VANDERHART  
*Oregon Public Broadcasting*

SALEM — A broken handshake agreement could have repercussions in the future, as leaders in both parties blame the other.

Even by the sour standards that often mark action in Salem these days, the Oregon Legislature's freshly ended special session managed to stand out.

Many of the hallmarks Oregonians have seen frequently in recent years were accounted for: a Republican walkout, accusations of bullying and partisan sniping about COVID safety among them.

But it's a more novel aspect of the session that could linger longest.

On the first day of the special session, House Speaker Tina Kotek pulled out of a deal reached in April, in which she gave House Republicans an equal say in redistricting in exchange for their commitment to stop requiring bills to be read in full before passage.

That agreement yielded huge benefits for Democrats, who saw their agenda largely breeze through the House during this year's regular legislative session. But Kotek's decision to abandon the deal when it appeared Republicans would use their equal footing to block her party's maps seems certain to have consequences going into the future.

Republicans in the last week have questioned why they would ever make another deal to end tactics

like requiring bill readings. Without such deals, legislative sessions could more and more resemble the scenes that played out earlier this year, when both the House and Senate resorted to having a computer program read bill language aloud for hours on end, while lawmakers accomplished nothing.

"As far as I'm concerned, we held up our end of the bargain as long as we could," Kotek said Monday, Sept. 27. "The challenge for us was, when it came a week out from getting everything done, what we were seeing from the House Republicans in particular was just not engaging at the level they needed to engage so we could reach consensus and compromise."

Republicans insist they were cheated. The party was so incensed by Kotek's decision that they stayed away from the Capitol on Sept.



Sam Stittes/Oregon Public Broadcasting  
Oregon House Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner (left) and House Speaker Tina Kotek speak on the dais of the House floor as they await confirmation of a quorum Saturday, Sept. 25, 2021.

25, refusing to grant Democrats a quorum to pass their proposals.

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