

# Masks:

Continued from Page A1

## Emergency board meeting

Officials at Wallowa County schools anticipate and welcome the return to local control of any mask mandate.

Mandy Decker, chairwoman of the Enterprise School Board, said the issue was the subject of a special meeting the board held Feb. 27 rather than waiting for its next regular meeting March 14.

At that meeting, the board decided to lift the mask mandate whenever the state decided to do so.

"They decided to support the state's recommendation to end the mask mandate whenever that happens," Superintendent Tom Crane said. "They support local control and they support choice of whether to wear masks or not."

That means families may decide for their children and employees may decide for themselves.

Decker said that Sunday's decision falls in line with what the board has stated in the past.

"The board has already said we'd like local control. ... My opinion is choice is really important," she said.

Lance Homan, superintendent of Joseph Charter School, said the school board will officially decide if it will take advantage of the option at its next meeting March 14. He declined to speculate on what its



Hallie Duncan plays with friends on the "hand rock" in front of the Enterprise Elementary School in October 2020.

Wallowa County Chieftain, File

decision will be.

However, he said, last summer the board voted to make masks optional. But then the county got hit with a surge in coronavirus cases and the governor and the OHA rescinded local control.

Wallowa Superintendent Tammy Jones was in meetings with other school officials Thursday morning and had already come to similar conclusions as her counterparts elsewhere in the county. She, too, said the school board in Wallowa would consider an official decision on the matter at its next board meeting, March 14.

"Over the next weeks, we're going to learn more details," she said, such as about quarantines, isolation, contact tracing and other related issues.

Jones recalled that at the July board meeting, the Wallowa School Board voted — like Joseph did — to make masks optional, a decision rendered moot by the uptick in cases that followed.

"We've done our best to live with it," Jones said, adding that the recent change "is good news for us."

School officials will find it a relief to not have to enforce the mask mandate.

It's one more thing they have to discipline students over.

"At times, yeah," it's been difficult, Enterprise Superintendent Tom Crane said.

Homan agreed, saying, "At times, for sure."

The OHA statement continued to recommend universal masking in K-12 settings where children are required to attend. Those settings bring together vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, as well as individuals who are at higher risk for severe COVID-19 illness.

However, local school officials said that while their students are required to attend school, they can do so remotely and are not required to be in the building.

## Case numbers subsiding daily

COVID-19 hospitalizations have declined 48% since peaking in late January, the release stated. Over the past two weeks, hospitalizations have fallen by an average of more than 30 a day. On Feb. 28, there were 479 people hospitalized with COVID-19 across the state. In Region 9, which includes Wallowa County, that number is at 10.

Reported COVID-19 infections also have dropped precipitously in recent weeks. Over the past month, new infections have declined by more than 80%. The seven-day moving average for new cases is 84% lower than at the peak of the omicron surge.

# Mandate:

Continued from Page A1

mask mandates.

Brown had originally said that the mask mandate would end March 31, about when Oregon Health & Science University projected the state would drop below 400 daily patients in hospitals who were positive for COVID-19.

The decline in omicron-related severe cases accelerated and the date was moved last week to March 19. But on Thursday, OHSU issued a forecast showing Oregon would dip below the 400-mark by March 12. The next OHSU forecast is due Thursday.

OHA said the lifting of the mask mandate did not include changes to federal and state rules on masks in health care settings, airline flights, public transit, and other specialized setting. Updates will be provided in coming days and weeks.

Brown's statement on Monday did not change her plan to lift the state of emergency earlier than April 1, the date she announced last week. The emergency rules gave Brown wide powers to set public policy during the crisis, including the closing and reopening of in-person classroom instruction, business hours, mask usage and limits on event sizes.

The three West Coast states have sought to coordinate on COVID-19 response throughout the pandemic, though they have gone their own way at times, such as the vaccine priority list in early 2021.

Brown said the governors believed the mask mandate change was best done at the same time for the stretch from the Mexican border to the Canadian border.

"Our communities and economies are linked," Brown said.

Brown underlined that the move did not mean the pandemic was burning out or nearly over.

"We will build resiliency and prepare for the next variant and the next pandemic," she said. "As we learn to live with this virus, we must remain vigilant to protect each other and prevent disruption to our schools, businesses, and communities — with a focus on protecting our most vulnerable and the people and communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19."

Oregon officials say they are confident that the move will not replicate the premature lifting of safeguards in July 2021 that came almost simultaneously with the arrival of the virulent delta variant that caused a record 918 deaths in September. Critics said at that time that lifting the ban statewide did not take into effect the wide differences in vaccination rates and prior COVID-19 exposure.

# Foster:

Continued from Page A1

focus on keeping children with families and providing support.

If foster care is necessary, Blessing said the first step is to look for relatives or close friends who can foster the child.

"We're trying to maintain

relational connections with kids — trying to keep kids connected to people they already know," she said.

In the case that a relative can't be found, the child is cared for by a general applicant foster family — but Blessing said work continues to find a relative.

The current recruitment efforts across the state are for general applicant families.

"So we have enough

families, and they're diverse enough, that we can match children to a family," she said.

## Every Child

Those who aren't ready to provide full-time care can learn more about foster care by volunteering with Every Child NE Oregon, which works to expand the support system around foster care.

"There are ways to sup-

port fostering without taking a child into your home," Blessing said. "It's a way to dip your toe in and learn what it's about."

She said that a general application family, on average, thinks about becoming a foster family for two to three years.

To learn more about Every Child, visit every-child-neoregon.org/ or follow the page on Facebook.

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WALLOWA COUNTY HUMANE SOCIETY

## Pet of the Week



**MEET OREO & DIESEL!**

Brother's Oreo (tuxedo) and Diesel (mini panther) were born approximately July 12, 2021. These neutered boys are up-to-date on vaccines, dewormed and are litter box trained. They've had a very hard start to their life and deserve the best fur-ever home together. They're lovebugs who also enjoy going outdoors on occasion.

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## JETT PETERSON

Joseph's Jett Peterson had the strongest performance of any Wallowa County wrestler at the 2A/1A state tournament Saturday, Feb. 26, in Culver. Jett won a pair of matches at 113 pounds, with the highlight being a pin in 40 seconds over Culver's Aiden Guest — a wrestler who had defeated him at the district tournament just a week prior. The junior finished one match shy of placing at state, but has momentum going into next season. (Photo by Ron Osterloh)

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