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have stepped up to provide a safe place for some of Oregon's most vulnerable children to go — providing academic support, social-emotional skill building and basic necessities," Trent said. "These programs help bridge the gap between school and home and have expanded their services during this crisis, providing free food and meal delivery to families in need as well as online, at-home educational, recreational and prevention programming for youth and parents."

Trent, Tomeny and members of Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue were masked or wearing face shields during the Friday morning class sessions yesterday. This is just one of many differences between this year's classes and those preceding.

All guests were checked for temperatures and asked a series of health related questions, then sanitized and allowed to enter the airplane hangar at Florence Municipal Airport now serving as a classroom.

"The hangar remains open with expanded space between tables and only two kids per table, six feet apart," Tomeny said.

In addition, the students walk with Boys and Girls

Club staff to the airport each day, since they are unable to take a bus.

"And we can't take them on any field trips, so we have had to ask supporting organizations to come to us," Tomeny added. "Many of them have, such as the Coast Guard, the Florence Police Department, the fire department and many wonderful speakers."

The two Air Academy leaders also wanted to provide more detail to concerned residents and parents in order to answer questions and criticism they have received on social media platforms. It was clear during this interview that a deep sense of the seriousness and a heightened sense of caution was being felt by both Trent and Tomeny.

"It is interesting to me — with all the discussions about inequities that are dominating the media, and learning that inequity is higher in



PHOTOS BY MARK BRENNAN/SIUSLAW NEWS
(Above) Members of Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue and (left) Florence Police Department visit the Florence Air Academy to talk to students about career opportunities in aviation and beyond.

the summer than any other time of year, that message has been lost in the COVID conversation," Trent stated. "Mental wellness in kids has never been higher than it is right now. Now, more than ever, it is important for kids to be able to have social interaction in a safe way."

Safety has been paramount for all participants of the academy. Both Trent and Tomeny are attempting to balance their own estimations of the overall risk, not only to the students, but to

themselves and the speakers participating in the course this summer.

According to Trent, this year's cadets are considered a closed group, similar to a family unit or friends at a restaurant. They are all checked for fever and symptoms multiple times a day and are kept apart. Mask requirements are similar to those used in restaurants and outdoors.

In addition, many of the Air Academy events are held outside in the open air, such

as touring the airport and learning to use remote control airplanes, drones, model rockets and more.

Any outside participants are screened in with temperatures and questionnaires — and provided plenty of space to keep separate.

The students seemed to be unaffected by the commotion surrounding their activities and their attendance was apparently just another shift in what is considered normal.

"We have 10 kids this year between the ages of 10 and 14," Tomeny said. "After the first two days, it has been obvious that they are having a great time, especially after struggling through the last several months. All of their parents know what we're doing, understand the minimal risks involved, and have signed permission slips."

"We all know that there

are people in the community that are scared and don't know what to do because they can't find accurate data or really understand the risk. But there are many others who understand the magnitude of the risk — understand it, and are more than willing to continue living a somewhat normal life with special precautions. So, we fully realize what we're facing, but when you start to work with kids who are really struggling, it's obvious that it is all worth it."

One big focus of the Air Academy has been empowering participants to consider life after school and what students can accomplish.

"It is equally important to introduce teens to career opportunities," Trent said. "Out of this group of Air Academy Cadets, only one had any idea of what he wants to do after graduation. So, this is the opportunity to explore careers in not only aviation, but many others where you can make a living wage. This is where we can connect kids to people and resources to help them get introduced into a career opportunity."

For more information on the Florence Air Academy and other after school programs, contact Boys and Girls Club of Western Lane County at 541-902-0304 and bgcwl.org.

SPORTS from page 1A

But despite the uncertainty of the future, the very existence of a schedule for sports is a welcome relief to athletes and educators looking to get back in the game.

"We didn't lose an entire fall season like we did the spring season, which I think is a breath of fresh air and something to be optimistic about," Johnson said. "Going forward, I hope we can put things together for kids to play the sports that they love. Right now, hope is something that we can all use a little dose of."

OSAA broke the sports schedule into four seasons, the first of which begins Aug. 17, 2020, and ends Jan. 3, 2021. No contests will be scheduled, with the season treated like summer.

"Teams are able to get together and practice and have optional workouts," Johnson said. "A lot of teams didn't have the opportunity to get together and practice during the summer because of safety issues. I think the hope is that it can be an open period for schools and teams to do off-season preparation."

But before the practices can begin, the district has to be cleared to allow onsite education, which is tied to a number of state, county and local metrics surrounding COVID transmission rates.

"Right now, if you look at the numbers in the county, we can't get kids together," Johnson said.

In September, Siuslaw School District is starting with distance education only, with a return to onsite impossible till at least October.

In the meantime, coaches are assigning at-home workouts to ensure students are physically fit.

"Some kids are involved in those and are trying to be fit and prepared. Other kids probably aren't, which is fine

too — we're all going through so much right now," Johnson said. "Obviously, we'd all love to get together, but we're being cautious and safe and waiting for a break in all this, which is something everyone wants to see happen. If we can social distance, stay home, wash our hands, limit our gatherings — anything is on the table. The best way for us to have sports in school is to have those numbers go down."

If all goes well, the "season two" will begin Dec. 28, 2020, with two weeks of practices for traditional winter sports including wrestling, basketball and swimming. Then, on Jan. 11, the very first games are scheduled to begin. As for what the games will look like, it's currently unclear.

"Talk about a blank slate," Johnson said. "It would be great for me to say that by January, everything's going to be fine and we'll have full gymnasiums and cheerleaders, but we won't really know that until things get closer."

Also unknown are how league scheduling and championships will be handled.

"All of those things are going to come out after administrators, coaches and OSAA sit, meet and negotiate," Johnson said. "How the nuts and bolts fit together remains to be seen."

As the championships for season two wraps up, "season three" will begin practices. This season will be traditional fall sports, including soccer, football, volleyball and cross country.

The overlap could create some scheduling issues for students involved in multiple sports.

"If you have a three-sport athlete, there's a lot of pressure on those kids to be everything," Johnson said. "It can get tricky. Our athletic department is going to work to do what's best for all of our kids to get an opportunity to pre-

pare for whatever season the kids see fit, and do the best we can as a community to allow for the best opportunity to get prepared."

"Season four" practices will begin in May and run into June, weeks beyond the typical sports schedule. This season will be particularly important for students as it represents spring sports such as track and field, baseball and softball.

Last year's spring season was the only athletics to be completely cancelled due to the shutdowns. When athletes return to their respective fields, it would be the first time in two years.

"I think if you're a freshman or sophomore, and you lost a whole year of development, obviously that puts you in a tough spot," Johnson said. "There's no question — the more chances kids have to compete and practice and participate, the better their chances are to develop."

It can also create a setback for students who were looking to use sports as a way to earn scholarships, particularly students who last played as sophomores.

"This year's upcoming seniors who didn't have a junior season didn't have a body of work for that year to showcase what their skills were," Johnson said. "College coaches aren't stupid, they can look at people who were successful as sophomores, and they can project forward, but it's difficult. We had some kids who were juniors this past year who were going to have fantastic track seasons. There's no question that the better their track seasons were, more heads were going to be turned. The same could be said for any sport. The junior year is impactful."

But the good news is that everybody in the country is facing the same challenges. "Nobody conducted any

sports this spring," Johnson said. "I don't think anybody has an unfair advantage. But I think the pressure is going to be on some of the college coaches to look at kids who were on their radars as sophomores, and just figure out if they were going to have big improvements."

Still, Johnson said that if Siuslaw is to start a spring season, school staff will do everything they can to make the most of it.

"We all have our unique challenges that meet our particular activity, but that's on the coach and the players to make the best of a situation that's obviously way less than ideal," he said.

And there's still a possibility that many of the scheduled seasons could be postponed or cancelled all together, depending on what occurs with the virus.

For those seniors last year that didn't get to compete in the spring, it was difficult. "At a micro level, our student athletes who lost senior seasons, that was a big deal for them," Johnson said. "They spend years and years preparing for that mythical senior season. Having it evaporate is really hard."

However, for the athletic director, it's important to keep the current moment in perspective.

"I think it's important to understand this year has been catastrophic for people," Johnson said. "People have lost the ability to work and businesses have shut down, the economy has slowed, people have lost their lives. I don't want to perpetuate that not having sports is catastrophic to the level of what other people have had to deal with in their lives."

Johnson's own son, Kiger, was supposed to finish his track and field high school career last spring, but it was cut short.

"We sat in the same house,

me teaching classes, him taking them," Johnson recalled. "We looked at each other and said, 'Wouldn't you rather be in school?' But we couldn't, and we did the best we could. He said, 'I don't want it to end this way, but at the same time, it's like, he graduated from high school and was able to make the best of a bad situation. That's what he did.'"

And that's what the coaches, athletes and parents of Siuslaw School District will continue to do.

"I got a couple of texts yesterday from students who heard the season was moved to February," Johnson said. "They were like, 'What now?'

We were full force, preparing for a season. They had plans and they were doing it. They were just looking for answers like we are. My answer was, 'We're going to keep training and we're going to do things a little differently this fall to prepare for competition season.'"

Johnson stayed positive, saying the students will use the extra time to train and focus.

"We'll try and do it better than everybody else," he said. "You can focus on studies in the fall, and figure out how to deal with the new normal in terms of distance learning. We'll just go from there. We'll make the best of the situation."

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