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But since then, the Delta variant has entered the community, causing multiple outbreaks, shutdowns and scares.

"People are wary of outbreaks, considering what's happened over the past month," Grzeskowiak said. "People are uncertain of how people behave outside of work, how they control environments, that's kind of the unknown factor people are concerned about."

And this leads to uncertainty for numbers of people — parents concerned about education and their living situations, businesses about their staffing and students about their lives.

Grzeskowiak acknowledged that opening will present challenges, and there may be times when sections of the schools, or even an entire building, could be closed. But if the entire community works to limit the spread of the virus, the future will be positive.

"This is one of those times that people really do need to band together," Grzeskowiak said.

The case against online

Grzeskowiak's case for reopening the school district centered around quality of education.

"The education kids are going to get in school is better than they're going to get online," he said. "Being in school and seeing teachers, aides, custodians, secretaries, nurses and bus drivers ... that type of interaction with educators of every realm is better than being online, where there's less ability to have meaningful contact with kids."

National studies have

shown that the shutdowns of the pandemic have put emotional stress on children, and severely disrupted their long-term educational track.

Logistically, online learning puts huge stresses on staff. "The teachers knocked themselves out," Grzeskowiak said. "They were duplicating work. It takes even more time to take care of the distance kids."

When polled, parents have consistently asked for schools to reopen.

"It's an economic reality that public schools are de facto child care, simply because we have so many families where both parents work, or we have single parent families, and they're dependent upon school to do the child-care," Grzeskowiak said.

But on-site instruction has its own challenges, and the guidelines do lay out instances where students will have to quarantine.

Contact Tracing

Potential outbreaks generally begin with a small cluster of people on a weekend, "vaccinated and unvaccinated, masked and sometimes unmasked, in which everybody thinks they're fine," Grzeskowiak said, recalling conversations he's had with Lane County. "What someone in there doesn't know is that they had contact four or five days ago with someone who did have it."

They unknowingly spread it at the gathering of friends, who in turn infects their children when they go home. On Monday, the child goes to school.

"Every time you sign your student into school, you are agreeing to the fact that they're not ill, and that they don't have a fever," Grzeskowiak said.

But sometimes symptoms don't present until later in a day, or a parent just thinks their child has allergies or a small cold. Sometimes the kids even fake being well.

"We've had this happen in the past, pre-pandemic," Grzeskowiak said. "Something really cool was going to happen that day so they fake being well to come to school, and then by nine o'clock they're throwing up in their chair."

Whatever the reason, they get past the health screening, where they will be met with some barriers to stop the spread. Masks will be required as the school year starts, and social distancing of three feet will be enforced.

"Classrooms that have tables have acrylic barriers on the tables," Grzeskowiak said. "The air flow units for HVAC have been updated. It injects ions into the airflow, and any sort of bacteria or virus in the airstream, it disrupts the protein coding and basically annihilates it. We're going to have the environment as safe as possible."

The student is fine for the first three periods, but by the fourth period, symptoms are becoming unbearable. They see a nurse.

"We put them in isolation, give them a rapid test," said Grzeskowiak.

If they test positive, contracting tracing begins. "If you're the person in

first period in this class, and there's 20 people in that contact group with you, I have to keep track of the 20 kids in this class, and if you go and get ill by fourth period, I'm worried about those kids too," Grzeskowiak said.

They then look into transitional contacts.

"Where did you go from first to second period? Did you go to the library, did you go to the nurses office," Grzeskowiak said. "That's what we have to track down as contact outside of your attendance group."

Depending on a student's schedule, direct contact could be as small as one elementary classroom, or as large as multiple high school classes.

They would then contact everyone and give a general notice that they may have been exposed, though not all of them will be isolated.

"(It's) not just the COVID outbreak, but the Monday panic," Grzeskowiak said. "That's when you get the mass exodus because one kid got sick."

Close contact students

The district begins to parse out students who were in direct contact, who would have to be around the student for 15 minutes or more at a distance of 6 feet or less.

Not all students in a classroom would fit that criteria, but for those that do, "They would get a phone call saying, 'Hey, you are considered to be a close contact of somebody that was a known positive,'" Grzeskowiak said.

There are different outcomes for each student.

"People who are vaccinated don't necessarily isolate, as long as they were masked during the entire period," Grzeskowiak said. "They would just monitor for any symptoms. They would have a test between days three and five. If it's negative, they would just continue monitoring symptoms through two weeks."

For the unvaccinated stu-

dents, they are asked to go home for isolation and online learning.

"It's probably going to be 14 days, but it could be as short as 10, depending on how the other child tests out," Grzeskowiak said. "Unvaccinated people were getting tested at day 7, if they were negative, and then resume day 10. But right now, they haven't been allowing that, simply because in August we were running really heavy with the case count. If things start lightening up, that could change."

For the student with COVID, a minimum of two weeks isolation is required, allowed back only if their symptoms and fever have gone for a 24 hour period, which can be difficult.

"You had homes where kids really couldn't isolate from each other, and you had this series of infections at home," Grzeskowiak said. "It went from sibling to parent, sibling to parent, sibling to sibling. And you wound up with the rotating infection. One kid may have gotten it twice, and then it goes back around. People are doing their best to isolate at home or with each other, or sometimes put a kid out in a trailer. It's hard to do that. It's really difficult."

The district is no stranger to these scenarios.

The greater impact

"We had two exposure incidents on campus in spring, but because we made sure we had distance and masks and regular sanitation, we didn't get any on campus transmission related to those events," Grzeskowiak said.

As for this year, small incidents have already occurred. A Siuslaw Elementary educator tested positive for COVID in late August. Then, on Sept. 9, the school district announced that there was a separate positive COVID case at the elementary, which led to the district notifying multiple close contacts, including some people at Siuslaw Middle.

But the period of concern does have an end date.

"By November and December, according to the FDA, kids will be allowed to be vaccinated," Grzeskowiak said.

While he did not have actual vaccine numbers for the 12-years-old and older students who are eligible now for the vaccine, he was able to report that the pre-COVID vaccination rates for diseases like measles hovered between 95 and 98 percent.

As for the possibility of an actual outbreak at the school, Grzeskowiak believes it will be low or non-existent, as it was this spring.

"There are schools that are operating without masks that have mass outbreaks, or where somebody that is known to be positive comes into school, and that's where outbreaks are happening," Grzeskowiak said. "We're not going to go into a situation where we're just going to let it spread. We're going to make sure that we pull back and go online for a bit to get that in control."

But the veracity of the Delta virus, which spreads rapidly and to more people, complicates the issue.

"You've got COVID running around and maybe this building or grade level has to close out for 14 days, along with an outbreak. That's the big issue," Grzeskowi-

ak said. "Now you're talking about having to transition and maintain education for anywhere from 25 to 100, to maybe an entire building. That's where you lose time, and what we don't want to do."

The higher the number of those in isolation, the greater the impact on the community's economy.

In addition, multiple students are employed at local businesses, and in some cases have made up the majority of employees. District guidelines also recommend family members be isolated during these periods as well, which could mean a greater drain on the workforce.

For parents that wouldn't need isolation, they'd be faced with the issue of child-care, which in turn also affects employment.

"You don't want to shut down whatever establishment you're working at," Grzeskowiak said. "I know there's been a lot of businesses that have unfortunately been through that. It would be horrible enough to have employees home because their children are out of school, but they can't operate if all their employees are sick. A lot of employers got really creative last year, allowing a lot of flexibility. And there's some jobs that just don't allow that."

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BOTH MEETINGS ARE CURRENTLY ON HOLD.
WATCH SIUSLAW NEWS FOR RESUMPTION

- Tuesday Evening Group (2nd Tuesday) 5-7 p.m. - Ichiban Chinese/Japanese Restaurant
- Urologist Dr. Bryan Mehlfahf attends.
- Tuesday Lunch Group (3rd Tuesday) 12 noon - 1:00 p.m. - Ichiban Chinese/Japanese Restaurant
- Urologist Dr. Roger McKimmy attends.

Contact Bob for more information:
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