

EDITORIAL

Uncertainty abounds for this fall

The Baker School District is preparing to welcome students to classrooms, most likely on Sept. 8, for the first time since schools were closed in March due to the pandemic.

The original schedule set Aug. 31 as the first day, but Superintendent Mark Witty has proposed to move back the opening until the day after Labor Day to give teachers and other staff an additional week to prepare for the changes necessitated by precautions designed to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

The Baker School Board will meet July 30 to consider Witty's plan. It's a good idea, and the board should approve it.

District officials are also working on a detailed reopening plan that the Board will consider during its Aug. 13 meeting. The District is required to submit that plan to the Oregon Department of Education for review by Aug. 15.

The district's preparations are gratifying. They reflect the optimistic viewpoint about the ability for public schools to return to something like normalcy after a spring and summer that were decidedly abnormal.

Which is not to say that the fall of 2020 will closely resemble the fall of 2019.

The best-case scenario is that Baker students from kindergarten through sixth-grade will learn in their classrooms as usual, Monday through Thursday.

The district's plan is to divide middle school and high school student bodies into two groups. One group would attend classes in person 2 days per week, while the other group is taking the same classes through the district's new online portal, a technology that Witty said is considerably more user-friendly than what the district employed this spring, when all classes, at all levels, were conducted online.

But there are also legitimate reasons to be pessimistic about the prospect of students returning to their classrooms, fresh pencils and unmarked notebooks in hand, as autumn approaches.

The rising rate of COVID-19 infections inevitably prompts some people, both parents and school employees, to wonder whether even an ambitious sanitation protocol, combined with an emphasis on social distancing and face coverings, can keep the virus at bay inside schools. Witty said Tuesday that parents of 52 students have told the district they plan to have their children attend classes online. He acknowledged last week that "I think we have to realize that we might have to prepare for all-online this year at some point."

For the past two weekly measuring periods — July 6-18 — 5.8% of Oregonians tested for COVID-19 were positive. That's the highest rate since early March. The recent daily record highs in new cases do not reflect only an increase in the number of people being tested (although that number has risen steadily as well) but also a higher percentage rate of infections.

Baker County has fared comparatively well, to be sure.

But of the county's 16 COVID-19 cases, 15 have been reported since June 30.

Oregon Public Employees United, a group whose members include public school teachers and other school employees, issued a press release this week that tosses a figurative bucket of cold water on the feverish efforts to plan a fall school schedule.

The group contends that "any return to on-site learning first requires that there are no new cases of COVID-19 in a school district's surrounding counties for at least 2 weeks."

The press release also contends that resuming in-person classes without adequate safety measures could have "disastrous consequences" and would be "an immoral decision."

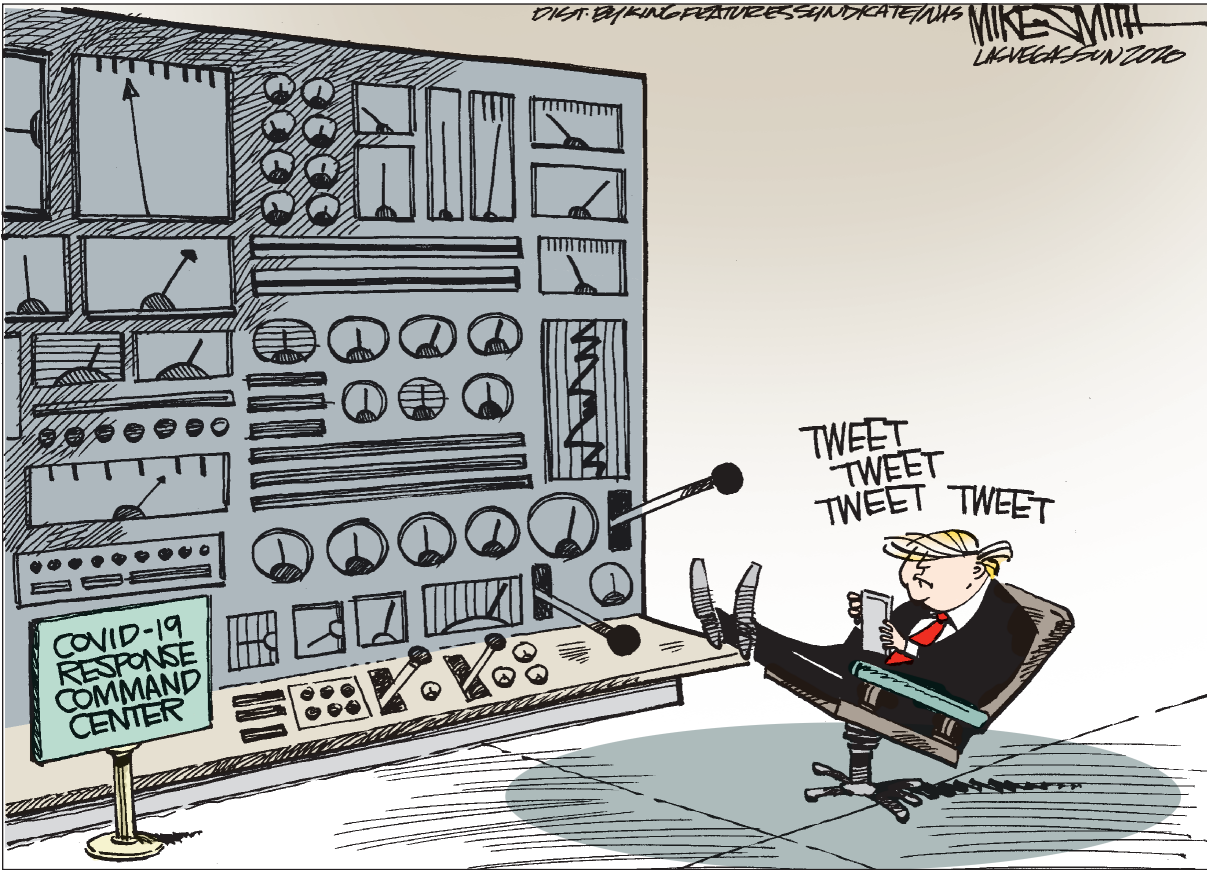
Beyond the classroom, the prospects for athletics is not exactly promising, either.

Buell Gonzales Jr., the Baker School District's athletic director, said last week that fall sports schedules will almost certainly be affected, with football the most likely to be postponed. California officials announced this week that fall sports in that state won't start until December or January. Washington high schools won't play football until next spring. The Oregon School Activities Association will decide this week what to do with the fall schedule in our state.

Baker County residents, as mentioned above, have managed the pandemic about as well as could be hoped. And well enough to justify the modified school schedule the Baker District is proposing.

But that still might not be good enough.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Opening colleges is risky, but the alternative is worse

Soaring coronavirus infections have provoked a lot of second thoughts among U.S. colleges and universities that were hoping to resume at least some in-person instruction in the fall. That's understandable, but troubling.

It's crucial to engage students in meaningful collaborative experiences that are difficult to achieve on Zoom. The damage to young people and institutions of higher learning will be deep and lasting unless administrators develop creative ways — in concert with both students and faculty — to revive key aspects of campus life.

There's no doubt that even partial reopenings will entail risks for colleges, though different ones from those facing K-12 schools. For one thing, over one-third of tenure-track faculty are 55 or older, significantly more than the general working population — putting college professors at greater risk of contracting life-threatening forms of COVID-19. Then too, while online education is far from ideal even for college students, young adults are better equipped than children to handle virtual classes. College students also have the ability to take a gap year if they don't like their college's educational offerings.

Focusing on freshman, a priority for institutions like Harvard University in Massachusetts and Bowdoin College in Maine, which are allowing some students to return while offering most instruction online, will allow universities to build a campus culture for their newest recruits. Freshman also need help making the transition from high school, where learning often follows mandates, to college where, ideally, they select their own courses and schedules and develop their own intellectual interests.

The pandemic is also a good opportunity for schools such as Princeton University, which are welcoming at least one other grade cohort, to create a buddy culture aimed at supporting younger students and enlisting undergraduates in brainstorming healthy campus interactions and creative solutions to living and learning in a pandemic. Masha Gessen, an author and essayist, suggested in the New Yorker that students "could form quarantine study pods" that could "embrace mutual care and interdependence." Such study pods could embark on team-based independent studies that might learn from, and propose solutions to, problems including pandemic living and the social upheaval sparked by the most recent police shootings — both subjects of interest to young people.

At a time when colleges are striving to recruit more students from marginalized communities,

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they will need to make accommodations for their financial and logistical needs. Even schools that are offering mostly virtual courses in the fall should open school buildings, including lecture halls and libraries, for students who do not have a quiet place to work or adequate internet connections at home.

More universities will need to think unconventionally. One model is Rice University in Houston, which is building outdoor structures. Another is Amherst College, which faces much colder weather in Massachusetts, and is erecting 20 tents for seminar-style classes.

All universities should strive to make accommodations for students studying subjects like laboratory sciences and fine arts, which rely on hands-on work. To be sure, these classes will require students and professors to shoulder a certain degree of risk, and will involve unanticipated expense. Oregon State University in Corvallis, for example, guarantees employers that its forestry graduates will be "field ready" and capable of doing everything from measuring trees to collecting data on forest sites — learning that cannot be supervised remotely. For classes with over 50 students, the forestry department will deliver lectures online; labs, which typically have fewer than 30 students and involve van rides to forests around the state, will be conducted in person.

To accommodate social distancing and the added costs of the pandemic, "everything will shrink," predicted Mindy Crandall, assistant professor of forestry policy at Oregon State, noting that the university's College of Forestry will need to hire more vans to transport students. At the same time, they will have to forgo longer trips that, in years past, exposed students to more forest ecosystems. "Students won't get the breadth of experience and the exposure," she said.

Indeed, public universities especially are facing a host of financial pressures that only extra funding from the federal government can alleviate. With state revenues shrinking due to COVID-19, universities sorely need an infusion of

aid beyond the \$14 billion available through the Cares Act, the \$2 trillion coronavirus relief package that Congress passed in March. For example, Rutgers University in New Jersey has taken a \$183 million hit so far; only \$27 million of that will be made up by funds from the Cares Act.

Colleges breathed a sigh of relief when the administration of President Donald Trump backed away from its threat to withhold visas from international students, who are a source of both intellectual diversity and much-needed revenue. At Baruch College in New York City, where I teach and where international students made up 11.6% of enrollment last year and paid close to \$19,000 apiece in tuition, it's still unclear what toll Trump administration policies and the pandemic will have on international enrollments this fall.

A recent Democratic Senate proposal to add \$132 billion for higher education singles out tribal colleges and historically Black institutions, many of which are now fighting for survival. The historically Black schools produce 42% of the nation's Black engineers and 80% of its Black judges. Such legislative initiatives need to be given priority.

At the same time, university systems like the City University of New York and the University of California that will go almost entirely online in the fall, need to do more to open campuses. Precisely because public transportation and tall buildings on many of these campuses create unique risks, universities need to include faculty unions in their planning. They will also need to lead by example, cutting administrative staff and salaries before demanding concessions from faculty, many of whom are low-paid adjuncts. CUNY recently laid off 2,800 staff, including many adjuncts who will also lose their health-care benefits.

The pandemic will test the ingenuity of college campuses. But even the most creative need political leaders and the public to put education first.

Andrea Gabor, a former editor at Business Week and U.S. News & World Report, is the Bloomberg chair of business journalism at Baruch College of the City University of New York and the author of "After the Education Wars: How Smart Schools Upend the Business of Reform."

Your views

America has claimed land by right of conquest

A recent letter to the editor quoted that America had "taken no land in its victory." Following the Mexican War of 1848 the U.S. took, by right

of conquest, California, Nevada and Utah, most of New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming.

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