

EDITORIAL

State sets unfair test for schools

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has given the Baker School District a series of tests to pass before the district can resume limited in-person classes for students starting Sept. 8, a plan the district announced earlier this month.

Unfortunately, those tests seem roughly comparable to requiring a first-grader to master algebra.

The COVID-19-related requirements the governor has set — “metrics” is the term of the moment — are not fair for Baker County and for other rural counties with small populations and comparatively few cases of the virus.

For instance, the Baker School District could not allow any students to attend classes in school unless the county, for three consecutive weeks, has a weekly case rate of 10 or fewer per 100,000 people.

Here’s the problem with that metric: To meet it, Baker County, based on its 2010 Census population of 16,134, could have no more than one positive case per week in each of those three weeks. Two positive cases in one week is a case rate of 12.4 per 100,000.

Although Baker County, with 25 cases as of Wednesday, has had fewer cases than 26 of Oregon’s 35 other counties, it could not have met that metric even based on its modest increase in reported cases during July. With nine cases the week of July 19-25, the county’s case rate was 55.8.

Baker School District Superintendent Mark Witty acknowledged the challenge the 10 cases per 100,000 metric presents in a press release Tuesday afternoon.

The state’s requirements could block the district’s entire plan for the resumption of classes Sept. 8. That plan calls for students in grades K-6 to attend classes in their schools Monday through Thursday, as usual. Middle school and high school students would be divided into two groups. Each group would attend in-person classes two days a week and take the same classes online the other two days.

Another metric is also unreasonable for sparsely populated counties such as Baker.

To have in-person classes, counties must have a weekly positive test rate of 5% or below, again for three consecutive weeks. This poses a challenge for Baker County because we have had relatively few residents tested — 833 as of Wednesday. If 85 people are tested in a given week, which is the county’s average for the past five weeks, if five or more of those people test positive — hardly an outbreak — the county would still fail to meet the 5% threshold (the positive test rate in that scenario would be 5.9%).

What’s troubling about this metric is that it in effect punishes counties where the virus is not prevalent. One reason relatively few Baker County residents have been tested is that few have the symptoms to meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention criteria for testing. Even accounting for the reality that some infected people have no symptoms, the county’s relatively low number of tests is a good thing. But based on the governor’s metrics the low number of tests actually makes it more difficult for the school district to resume in-person classes.

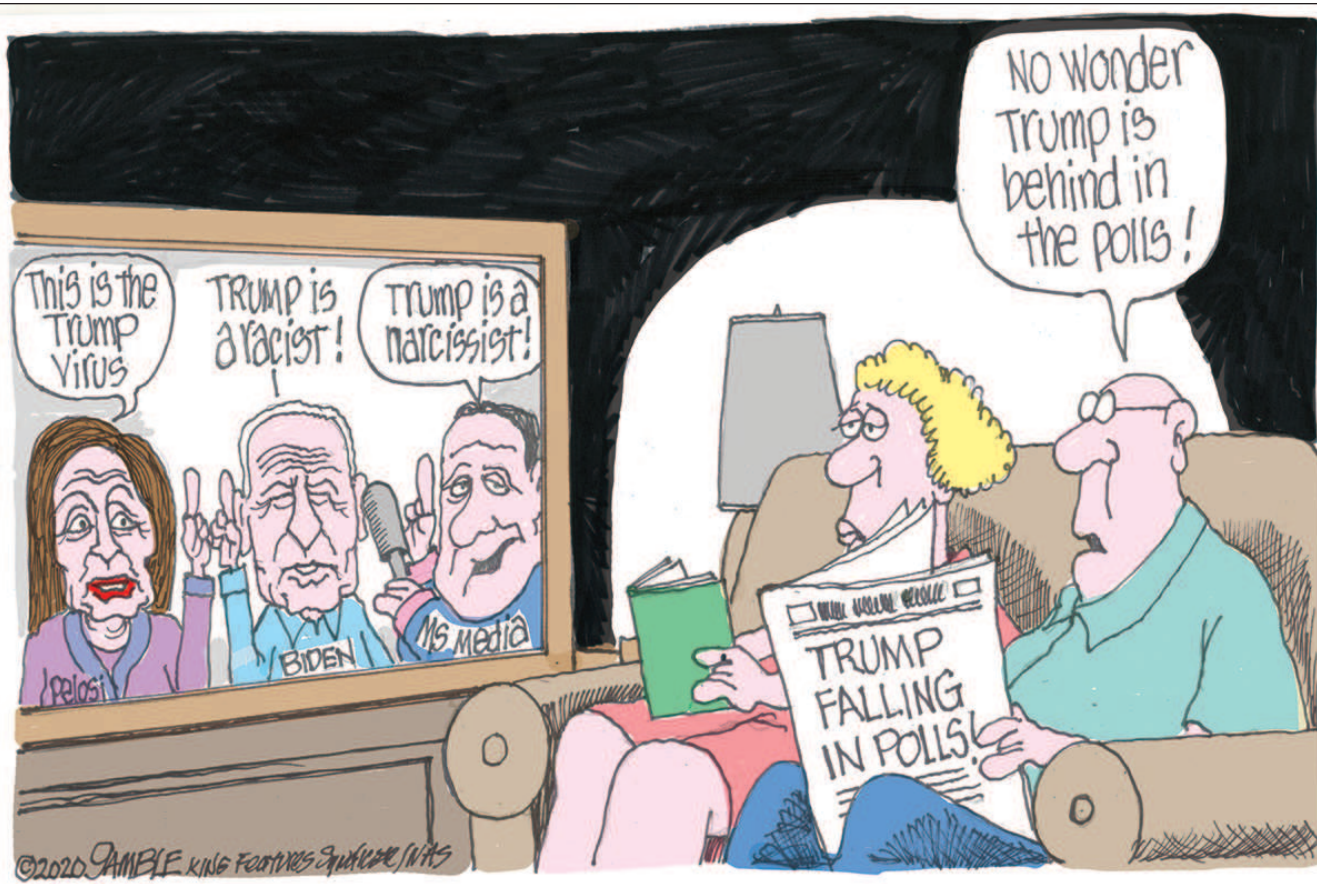
Yet the state’s requirements that are specific to the virus prevalence in individual counties are not even the most onerous examples. Brown also puts counties at the mercy of the state as a whole, in effect potentially punishing counties such as Baker, where the virus has not spread widely, for future outbreaks in counties such as Multnomah, Marion and Clackamas.

Here’s how: Besides requiring each county to meet specific metrics, the state won’t allow in-person classes in any county, with the possible exception of K-3 students, unless the statewide weekly positive test rate is 5% or below for three straight weeks. There’s no reason to punish Baker County students for an outbreak in Portland or Salem, but that’s precisely what this metric could do. The only reason for optimism is that the statewide weekly positive test rate, after exceeding 5% for three straight weeks starting in late June, dipped to 4.8% for the most recent week, ending July 25. If that trend continues through August, then school districts would have the small solace of having to meet only county-specific metrics rather than also depending on a statewide test rate staying below 5%.

The state is more lenient for K-3 students. They could attend classes at school if the county’s weekly case rate drops below 30 per 100,000 population and has a positive test rate of 5% or below. Brown, who acknowledged Tuesday that younger students are less likely to spread the virus, should at a minimum expand that metric to include students through sixth grade. That could at least allow the Baker School District to teach K-6 students in classrooms starting Sept. 8, even if the district’s hybrid model for middle and high school students isn’t possible.

The state’s school plan is simply too broad, and relies too heavily on percentages rather than on the actual prevalence of the virus. There’s no legitimate reason for depriving students in Baker County of in-person learning based on the incidence of COVID-19 within our borders.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Editor’s column misplaced blame

By Steve DeFord

In regards to Jayson Jacoby’s column of Saturday, July 18 — “Masks and March: facing up to the question” — I believe that you are in error for placing the blame for the “mask game” squarely on the wrong person. It seems to me that Governor Brown (and all other governors) have had to handle this COVID-19 crisis in a vacuum. A vacuum solely created by the Trump administration.

His repeated efforts to downplay the seriousness of the virus, even joking about it, after being warned of the consequences by organizations and knowledgeable individuals, displays a total lack of concern for America’s citizens. Fellow Americans, whose lives depended on timely, accurate information and correct treatment, were denied the truth and many have suffered tremendously as over 4 million cases of the virus have been reported and there are close to 150,000 deaths in the United States. It is too bad that we didn’t have any insightful, intelligent presidential leadership at the onset of the virus. But we have a person in charge who doesn’t believe in science and truth and doesn’t trust anyone. Now we all suffer because of his incompetent handling of this virus.

A condensed timeline shows that in February 2018 the Trump administration began a conscience effort to critically reduce funding for agencies that deal with communicable diseases. Then high ranking health officials are pushed out of the administration and the Global Health Security Team is disbanded.

In early 2019 the Director of National Intelligence issued a warning about the social and economic consequences of the virus in our country that Trump ignored. Later in 2019 Trump ended the pandemic early warning program that trained scientists to identify viruses that could turn into a pandemic.

In early January 2020, the CDC was alerted about the virus in China and, days later, issued an official health warning about COVID-19. Two weeks later Trump finally agrees to meet with HHS Alex Azar to discuss the virus. Two days later the first case of COVID-19 is officially reported in Washington State.

That’s when Trump told Americans not to worry about the virus as only 1 case had been reported and everything was under control. “Everything is going to be fine,” he stated.

While Trump denied the virus problem, advisers and aides and even

congressional members reached out to him to take immediate action to protect Americans. HHS asked to transfer \$136 million in funds to combat the virus but was denied as it would be “alarmist.” Meanwhile, Trump was telling Americans at his rallies that, “we only have 5 people. Hopefully, everything is going to be great.”

To look like he was taking “some kind of action” Trump implemented a useless travel ban that kept almost no one from China out of the U. S. On the same day face masks and latex gloves sold out at Amazon and in New York. In an interview with Sean Hannity, Trump claimed to have shut it (the virus) down.

The Senate Intelligence Committee was briefed in early February about the serious threat the virus posed to America by Robert Kadlec, the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response and other intelligence officials. In early February HHS Secretary Alex Azar requested \$2 billion to buy respirators, masks and other supplies for a depleted federal stockpile for emergency equipment but the request was denied by Trump. Eventually, Congress sent \$500 million weeks later.

While Trump continues his political rallies denying the spread of the virus, knowledgeable people including congressional members, governors, the former head of Trump’s FDA and others are learning the truth about the deadly virus and what his inactions are costing in American lives and suffering. In late February he was still telling Americans that the virus is under control and not to worry. Congress finally recognized the coming threat and offered the administration an additional \$6 billion extra to prepare for the virus. Trump was still telling people at his rallies that he’d done a “pretty good job of stopping the virus.”

In March HHS says they don’t have enough respirators for a pandemic. Advocates for social distancing and school closures begin to speak out but Trump says that developments are good for the consumer and compares the COVID-19 to the common flu.

In early March Trump continues telling everyone who will listen that “as a country we’re prepared and we’re doing a great job and that it will just go away.”

In mid-March he finally announces support for a 15-day social distancing measure and other measures to slow the virus’ spread. He said that he expects it to last several more weeks at most.

It was suggested to the president by Oregon’s senators that he could use a Defense Production Act to dramatically increase the PPE needed during the virus. He signed the executive order but declined to use it.

On March 17, 2020, Trump told reporters that “he knew it was a pandemic long before it was called that by other officials.” Later in the week he tweeted about using Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin as a preventative for the virus. This was proven to be a false and extremely dangerous claim and Trump was called out on it by almost every knowledgeable person at the time.

In late March Trump decided that the 15-day period of distancing, “may be worse than the problem itself.” Then he decided that churches should be allowed open for Easter while criticizing the World Health Organization for “mis-handling the pandemic” and ending funding for it. The WHO responds by stating that they were very clear about the warning in early January.

We all know now how bad the virus is and a lot of the misery and deaths could have been avoided if we had an intelligent, insightful, caring president who was willing to work for everyone’s health and security. But we’ve been stuck with a dawdling old fool who wouldn’t listen to experts because he doesn’t “trust science.” Now, he’s saying we have to open the schools regardless of science! That’s where you go to learn science, I thought. He must have missed that class, too.

I think you really missed the mark on this one. You should have placed the “mask game” blame squarely on the shoulders of the one person who had a chance to stop or at least minimize the COVID-19 crisis: Trump! He had a chance to provide some meaningful leadership when our country desperately needed it. He has failed his country, again.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States seems to me to be the place to look for leadership in a situation like this. This is grade school stuff, but we forget. Read it again and apply it to today.

“We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, Promote the General Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Steve DeFord lives in Sumpter.

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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