

SCHOOLS

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The requirements aren’t as strict for students in grades K-3, who Brown says studies have shown are less likely to contract and spread the coronavirus.

The District had planned to bring all students from K-6 back to school for modified in-person classes on the first day of the new year.

Those in Grades 7-12 were to be taught from the start in a hybrid model that called for dividing the students into two cohort groups that would rotate between online and in-person study every other day throughout the four-day week.

But based on the metrics the governor announced Tuesday, Baker County’s rate of new weekly positive cases exceeds the standard for having any in-person classes, including a hybrid model.

“Our metrics today are pretty clear,” Witty said. “Under the current guidelines, we’re doing comprehensive distance learning.”

At the Aug. 5 noon meeting, which will be conducted remotely by Zoom, Witty will present more information and ask the Board for its decision on the issue.

To be able to offer any in-person classes for grades 4-12, a district must be in a county that has a new case rate of 10 per 100,000 population or less for three straight weeks, and a test positivity rate of 5% or below for three straight weeks. In addition, the overall Oregon positivity rate has to stay below 5% for three straight weeks.

For Baker County, more than one positive case per week would prevent in-person school from taking place under the current metrics.

The requirement for having in-person classes for grades K-3 is 30 cases for 100,000 population or less for three straight weeks.

Witty presented a chart comparing seven rural Oregon counties that would be held to the same standards as Oregon’s most populous counties on the western side of the state.

Harney County, for example, is the state’s largest county by area with 10,133 square miles, and has less than one person (0.7) per square mile. Under the current metrics, Harney County, which as of Friday had recorded eight positive cases, could not have even one person test positive in a week and still qualify to have in-person classes. Harney County has 10 separate schools or districts.

In seeking change in the statewide system, Witty showed a draft presentation that regional representatives plan to share with state leaders in the hope of prompting more flexibility for rural counties.

On Thursday, Witty discussed the presentation with the Board. Among other points, the paper points out that the long distances between communities in rural counties make it difficult for residents to interact.

“This needs to be taken into consideration when calculating the threat of community spread,” the presentation states.

The regional group would

propose, instead, that local health officials be given authority to set the metrics for an area based on their firsthand experience and knowledge of their counties.

Witty said officials from the governor’s office and the Oregon Department of Education are willing to look at making changes.

“Folks are working with us and are attempting to come up with strategies that make sense, especially for frontier counties,” Witty said.

“We too have a responsibility,” he said. “We want to keep our students, staff and families safe. But this metric of one size fits all, doesn’t quite fit Baker County.”

Witty asked the Board for guidance about how to proceed. He said he envisions comprehensive distance learning in a block of six to nine weeks when classes get underway. As coronavirus trends are analyzed, a move to in-person school might be possible at that time.

Witty said he would expect staff to be in their buildings during the all-online learning model.

“I’ve told the union that one of the things I’m going to require is that you’re in your class,” he said, adding that the full breadth of availability to the new technology equipment is accessed from the classrooms.

“We’ve got to have really good expectations with students, families and staff and accountability measures built in,” Witty said.

Food service and child care also will be two major components of the new school year.

“It’s definitely part of our strategy to be able to offer child care to our employees as well as to essential workers,” Witty said.

Board members agreed that plans should be finalized as quickly as possible for the benefit of the community’s children and families.

“I like the idea of getting another week of information,” said director Julie Huntington. “From my perspective, kids need routine and they need to know what’s expected of them. They just don’t adapt well to everything being up in the air.”

COVID

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“I’m very thankful that the people we’ve talked to, they want to reduce the risk of anyone else getting sick,” Hills said. “They don’t want to put any of their family members at risk, or anyone in the community.”

Hills said people who have tested positive have cooperated with the county’s contact tracers to compile a list of people whom they might have inadvertently infected.

And these patients have also complied with the county’s request that they self-isolate at home for 10 days after the onset of symptoms, and for 24 hours after symptoms dissipate, she said.

Hills said people who have been in close contact with a resident who tested positive have also cooperated, by self-quarantining for 14 days after having had close contact with an infected person. The county also asks those people to take their temperature twice per day and report the results, as well as any other possible COVID-19 symptoms, to the Health Department.

“From our interactions with people, I think that, yes, the majority of them are following our guidance,” Hills said.

Case investigation process

Hills said the rate of confirmed cases has been slow enough that she’s been able to conduct all the initial interviews with infected residents.

Baker County’s weekly peak has been nine cases from July 19-25, according to the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

Of the 29 positive tests, 28 have been reported since June 30, including two new cases on Friday.

(The county’s first case was reported May 6.)

As of Friday, 922 county residents have tested negative for COVID-19, according to the OHA. That’s about

5.5% of the county’s estimated population of 16,800.

Hills said that when she receives confirmation about a positive test, either from a doctor or medical clinic, she telephones the patient.

In most cases the person has already been notified by a health care provider, she said, although in some cases she has told the person about the positive test.

Hills said the initial phone call generally lasts around 20 minutes. She asks the patients about symptoms and any underlying medical conditions they might have.

A crucial part of the interview, though, is compiling the list of the person’s close contacts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define close contact as being within 6 feet of another person for 15 minutes or longer, Hills said.

Those criteria apply regardless of whether the encounter happened indoors or outdoors, and whether or not either of the people involved was wearing a face covering, she said.

Hills said she asks patients to list all potential close contacts from two days before symptoms began.

She said all the people who have tested positive had symptoms of varying degrees. Generally local residents who don’t have symptoms aren’t being tested because they don’t meet the CDC criteria for testing.

Because it can be challenging for people to remember who they might have had close contact with over a period of a week or longer, Hills said that after her initial

phone interview she schedules a follow-up call to give people more time to consult a calendar, talk with relatives or otherwise refresh their memories.

“We try to help jog their memory,” she said.

Typically close contacts occur at social gatherings, appointments or similar events, Hills said.

A person who has shopped at a store, for instance, probably won’t have any encounter that qualifies as a close contact. However, Hills said she asks people to make sure they didn’t, say, stop to talk with a fellow shopper for longer than 15 minutes at the grocery store.

Hills said the number of people on the final list of close contacts has varied, in Baker County’s 29 cases, from as few as two people to around 10.

Contact tracing

Once Hills has compiled the list of close contacts, she or another county employee starts the contact tracing process.

Thus far she and four other tracers have been able to handle the workload, although Hills said the county has additional people trained to do contact tracing if necessary.

Contact tracing is similar to the interview with the person who tested positive.

Hills said she phones the person and explains — if the person hasn’t already been notified by the resident who tested positive, as sometimes has happened — that he or she might have been in close contact with an infected person.

She inquires about possible

symptoms, and then asks the person to self-quarantine for 14 days from the date of the close contact.

The county encourages people who have symptoms to visit a doctor and, ideally, be tested.

Self-quarantine means the person tries to avoid contact with others as much as possible, generally leaving home only for doctor’s appointments, or to take a walk or car ride if it’s possible to avoid contact with others.

People are also asked to try to minimize contact with others in their household, if they don’t live alone.

Hills said the self-quarantine period is important because a person can infect others up to two days before symptoms begin.

Hills said there have been situations in which a person who was listed as a close contact by an infected person subsequently had symptoms and also tested positive.

Some of these cases involved transmission by a

resident to a family member in the same household, and others involved the infection of an acquaintance who isn’t a member of the household, Hills said.

Recovered patients

Hills said the Baker County Health Department doesn’t follow up on cases for the purpose of determining whether the person has recovered.

The OHA does maintain some statistics about the recovery rate, but the data are not separated by county.

However, no one in Baker County has died as a result of COVID-19 infection.

Moreover, county officials have said no one is hospitalized for treatment.

Recommendations for residents

Hills said that in interviewing the residents who tested positive, it’s clear that in many cases symptoms of infections are “very mild.”



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