

Opinion

BAKER CITY
Herald
Serving Baker County since 1870

Write a letter
news@bakercityherald.com

EDITORIAL

Contact tracing limitations

Contact tracing — until this year a process familiar mainly to epidemiologists — is elegant in its simplicity.

Or so it seemed.

The idea is to track the spread of communicable diseases by interviewing people who are infected and finding out who they have had close contact with and thus might unknowingly have spread the disease to.

In some cases the potential infectious encounter is obvious — a person who tests positive spends a couple of days in a small house with a group of friends.

But the limitations of contact tracing have become apparent in Oregon during the coronavirus pandemic. For much of this summer, contact tracers haven't been able to determine the source of infection for more than 40% of Oregonians who tested positive. The rate of "mystery" infections recently is even higher in some counties, including 62% in Multnomah County, the state's most populous, and 67% in Clackamas, which ranks third in population, according to The Oregonian.

A potential reason for this level of uncertainty is the limited nature of contact tracer interviews. Oregon Public Broadcasting and The Oregonian reported last week that contact tracers aren't asking people who tested positive for COVID-19 whether they've patronized a bar, restaurant or gym during the period when they might have been infectious.

Health officials from Multnomah County told The Oregonian that this question isn't part of contact tracing interviews because there aren't enough tracers to track potential infections based on places the infected person visited, and that the primary goal is to identify people who might have been in close contact with an infected person. Those people are then asked to voluntarily quarantine during the period when they might be infectious.

But even if health agencies don't have resources to backtrack every infected person's movements, conducting more thorough contact tracing interviews would at a minimum yield additional data. And if ever there was a situation when more information is welcome, surely the coronavirus pandemic is that situation.

The purpose isn't to target bars, restaurants and gyms, many of which have been devastated financially during the pandemic. The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) hasn't reported any COVID-19 outbreaks at a bar or gym, and the agency has announced just six relatively small outbreaks at restaurants, involving five to 14 infections. But the OHA limits disclosure of such outbreaks — it doesn't announce ones involving fewer than five people or ones at businesses that employ fewer than 30.

But the OHA is unlikely to reveal latent infection patterns if contact tracers aren't asking possibly relevant questions. Responses to those questions, besides the obvious benefit of potentially identifying sources of community spread and making it possible to deal with those sources, could help businesses by alerting them to potential gaps in their COVID-19 precautions.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Schools, families must work together on distance learning

Many teachers, students and their families can agree on one thing after experiencing the unexpected hurricane that was distance learning this spring: It must improve — especially in the earliest grades, transitional kindergarten through second grade.

Our youngest students, from ages 4 to 9, need more supervision throughout the day and help with the technology that enables learning. They are developmentally different from their older peers in ways that significantly impact how they best learn. Distance-learning practices must reflect that reality.

As educational researchers, we learned from conversations with teachers, school leaders, parents and early-education experts what strategies were effective for initiating and sustaining student engagement in the spring. Anyone responsible for supporting young students in distance learning could benefit from employing these approaches.

Obviously, distance instruction is not the same as in-person instruction and should not look the same. Sure, some strategies can transfer to a distance classroom, but forcing distance learning to look like "normal" school is trying to put a square peg in a round hole and will only hurt our youngest students.

California requires at least 180 minutes of instructional time a day for kindergarten students and 230 minutes for grades one through three. Setting this expectation is critical for ensuring students receive daily interaction with teachers and their peers. However, many districts, including Los Angeles Unified, have struggled with determining how much instruction should be given through live, uninterrupted video streams. LAUSD is giving teachers broad leeway on that front.

Even adults have trouble videoconferencing for long stretches. For the youngest students, it is nearly impossible.

It's an ineffective strategy for younger students for an obvious reason — they have shorter attention spans. But the livestream approach also emphasizes the quantity of instruction without giving enough attention to quality.

In a traditional classroom, young

BENJAMIN COTTINGHAM

ALIX GALLAGHER

students spend significant amounts of time learning in small groups with peers rather than with the whole class, so that teachers can provide individualized feedback, more easily conduct lessons, and intentionally facilitate social interactions between students. Distance classrooms should mirror this approach.

Live instruction in distance classrooms should be structured around short interactive lessons, with synchronous learning opportunities — where students learn together at the same time — broken into smaller chunks throughout the day. Teachers should have multiple opportunities to interact with students one-on-one and in smaller groups, and they should make it a priority to use learning activities that allow students to work together.

Play is essential for learning and key to young students' development of interpersonal skills, as well as their social emotional well-being. There are many creative ways teachers can reach beyond the computer screen to facilitate play.

Games such as "Simon Says" help build executive-functioning skills and provide an opportunity for energetic young students to move. Technology can be used to facilitate play and engagement between students through various education applications and games. Teachers can also use interactions similar to "carpet time" to foster engagement where students interact with materials or items individually and share their creations with their teacher and classmates.

And as families know all too well, young students need ongoing adult engagement to guide their distance learning. To support parents, schools and districts such as San Francisco Unified are partnering with community organizations that traditionally support students to provide learning spaces and trained staff to help students to safely complete distance

learning lessons. And teachers only have so much time, so maintaining regular contact with student families should not just fall to them — counselors and noninstructional staff should help out.

In the spring, some teachers created flexible lessons that families could adapt to the time and resources available to them. Providing students and parents with options for different activities drives engagement while being responsive to family needs. Regular check-ins with a student's family should serve as a troubleshooting opportunity, whether it's about the academics or the family's well-being.

In addition, lessons focused on topics important to students' families can also help bring culturally relevant instruction to the fore.

Teachers should provide alternatives to student learning as a group by offering at-home work that can be completed on their own or away from the computer. These might include online literacy, numeracy and math, and science lessons as well as such activities as guided reading in any language or building math skills through daily activities such as cooking or telling time.

Just as in a brick-and-mortar classroom, young students should be encouraged to display their mastery of new concepts, which could be accomplished through apps, verbal sharing and small-group conversations.

In the spring, many schools and districts did not do a good enough job communicating expectations to parents. Teachers and schools need to make sure families and students understand their roles in making distance learning work. A clear schedule should be provided that establishes the time, for example, for whole-class morning meetings, guided readings, the teacher's office hours, and the blocks of time for instruction.

Improving distance education in ways that support student learning this fall will require meaningful changes in practice and tighter collaboration between schools and families. Distance education is here for the foreseeable future. We need to get better at it.

Benjamin Cottingham and Alix Gallagher are educational researchers at Policy Analysis for California Education.

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

President Donald Trump: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1414; fax 202-456-2461; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov/contact.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (2nd District): D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. La Grande office: 1211 Washington Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-624-2400, fax, 541-624-2402; walden.house.gov.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR

97310; 503-378-3111; www.governor.oregon.gov.

Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

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

State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe, Lynette Perry, Arvid Andersen, Larry

Morrison, Jason Spriet and Doni Bruland.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Ray Duman, police chief; Sean Lee, interim fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.