

EDITORIAL

Keep our students in school

Baker School District students will start their Christmas vacation on Dec. 18.

But whether they will return to their classrooms on Jan. 4, 2021 — one day per week, for those from seventh through 12th grades — remains uncertain.

Mark Witty, Baker Schools superintendent, said recently that if the recent trend in the number of new COVID-19 infections continues in Baker County, the district, under current state guidelines, would have to revert to online classes only for all students in the new year.

This is not necessary, and it should not happen.

Gov. Kate Brown should ensure that Baker students from kindergarten through sixth grade continue to have the option to learn in classrooms each day rather than watching a computer screen.

And the governor should also consider allowing older students to spend more than one day per week in the classroom.

November was Baker County’s worst month during the pandemic, statistically speaking, with 141 new virus cases. The trend has continued during the first week of December, with a daily record of 18 new cases on Dec. 3. More than half of the county’s 335 total cases, as of Tuesday, were reported since Nov. 1.

But Baker schools are not the problem.

Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, has said repeatedly that the main sources of the late autumn surge are parties and other social gatherings.

As of Tuesday, of the 716 elementary students who have been attending in-person classes four days per week since Oct. 14, just six have tested positive for COVID-19. There have been no cases among middle school or high school students, who returned to in-person classes, on one day per week, on Nov. 9. Just four district employees have tested positive since July 1, and the most recent case, reported Dec. 3, was the first among school staff since summer. Both Witty, Staten and Dr. Eric Lamb, the county’s public health officer, have said there’s no evidence that any students or staff was infected at school.

Moreover, the protocols that the school district has employed, including mask requirements, frequent sanitation and having students and staff stay home temporarily if they had been in close contact with someone who tested positive, have proved to be effective in preventing the virus from spreading inside schools.

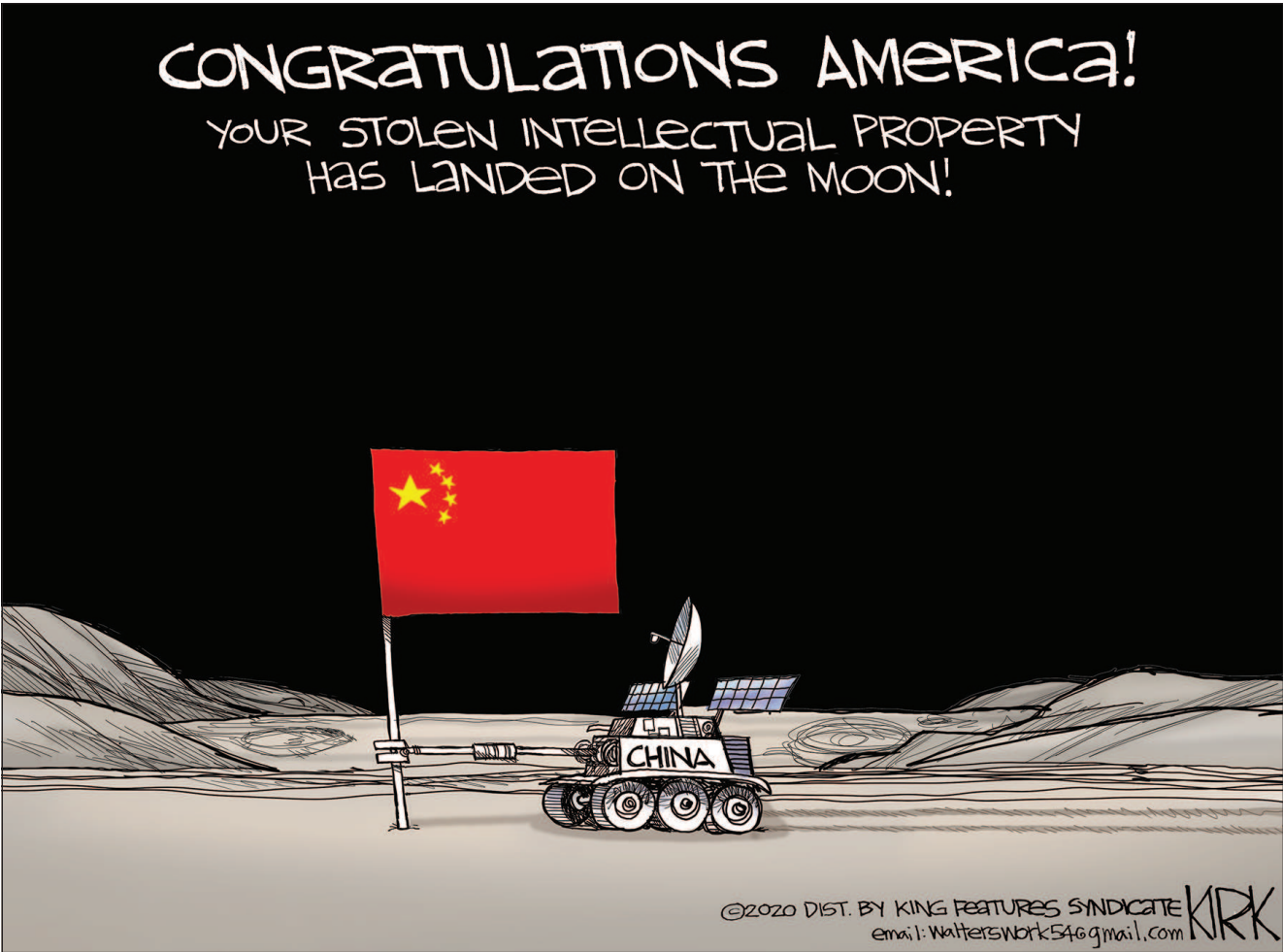
The rapid rise in COVID-19 cases in Baker County over the past several weeks is troubling, to be sure.

If more people are vigilant in wearing masks when they can’t maintain distancing, and in eschewing the sorts of gatherings that can facilitate the spread of the virus, then the county can reverse the trend.

We’ve shown that’s possible. Between Oct. 10-23, the county reported only one new case.

But regardless of the county numbers, so long as Baker schools continue to succeed at preventing the virus from spreading, students, who derive undeniable benefits, both academic and social, from attending classes in person, shouldn’t be punished.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Cancel useless pandemic rules

By Faye Flam

A clutter of unhelpful pandemic rules is wearing people down. One-way systems in stores, outdoor mask mandates, ceaselessly cleaning groceries and packages — should these things be our top priorities for limiting the spread of COVID-19?

Harvard’s Joseph Allen is an associate professor of exposure assessment science and one of the world’s experts on why some indoor spaces are worse than others for spreading viruses. Like other experts, he agrees that poorly ventilated indoor sites are the prime spreading ground for SARS-CoV-2. So the longer people spend in any indoor space with other people, the greater the risk they pose to themselves and others.

I asked him: Wouldn’t it be better if we did away with the one-way system so that people could dispatch with their grocery shopping quickly, without having to endure long waits behind price-comparers or other slowpokes? The answer is yes. Eliminating those annoying arrows would probably make shopping safer as well as less stressful.

Businesses are, of course, free to impose their own rules, but it’s unlikely many would knowingly make shopping less safe. The fault lies with the public health community for being too shy in talking about which rules don’t help, leaving us with a tangle of rules and recommendations — and pandemic fatigue.

State rules have an even bigger effect on our lives and are often thrown at people with no transparency. My state of Rhode Island has recently become one of the worst five states for per-capita infections, despite getting praise from Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, at the end of the summer for our strict rules and good compliance. With cases already climbing in late November, Gov. Gina Raimondo held a press conference where she scolded citizens for not following the rules.

Soon afterward, a talk radio host voiced what I was thinking. Who are these people filling up the hospitals? Where do they live? What kind of work do they do? Do we have any idea how they got the virus? And which rules, exactly, were they breaking?

As risk communication consultant Peter Sandman has said early in the pandemic, a public health policy that people don’t follow is a failed policy. That means even a really solid, science-

based set of rules can fail if it’s not communicated with a clear rationale.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker has focused his latest round of rules on outdoor mask wearing — something that many experts have said is unlikely to help since the virus is extremely unlikely to be transmitted over distances outside. The British Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies has deemed outdoor mask wearing of negligible benefit.

Baker’s ruling prompted Harvard epidemiologist Julia Marcus to suggest in Boston.com that he’s playing pandemic theater. “Arbitrary public health rules are a way to break the public’s trust, which is essential to keeping people engaged in public health efforts,” she told a reporter for the site. “I think a mandate like this — that people know is arbitrary — is going to do more to reduce trust than it will to reduce infections.”

Harvard’s William Hanage, who studies infectious disease dynamics, told me that people don’t need more rules. They need more information about how the virus is transmitted so they can take steps to avoid it. “When you phrase things in terms of rules, it leads people to try to come up with ways to get around those rules,” he says.

Rules can become a form of misinformation. The rules in many states seem to suggest that walking outside is dangerous and eating in a restaurant is safe, but Hanage says the truth is the other way around.

Baker has justified his outdoor mask mandate by saying it sends a message. The message I heard was that the rules are not chosen for our health and welfare but to make our political leaders look like they are doing something.

Rules should only be decreed along with evidence for their benefit, argued statistician and risk communication expert David Spiegelhalter in a piece for The Guardian: “Too often, the message is shaped by communication professionals working to ensure the greatest number of people ‘get the message’ rather than thinking about how to present the evidence so the greatest number of people can understand it, trust it, and then decide for themselves.”

I hear from diverse readers who want to do the right thing, but need to know where to focus their efforts. A farmer in Florida recently wrote to me about the pandemic fatigue that’s affecting him and his neighbors. “What happens here

is that we get worn out, beaten down and overloaded such that no matter how well-intentioned we are we are prone to latch onto something wrong.”

“So I think people here get it that it’s serious ... they like their neighbors and don’t want them dead,” he wrote. But they’re wondering how much effort to put into disinfecting groceries and kitchen counters — something that some media outlets recommended in the spring, as well as wearing gloves at the gas station, disinfecting credit cards and letting packages sit outside for a few days before opening them.

Harvard disease expert Hanage says that the science to date points to the primary risk coming from what he calls the three C’s — close contact, closed spaces and crowds. He says in Japan, where they’ve had few COVID-19 deaths, people are advised to avoid these — not just to wear masks in these situations but to limit them or avoid them altogether.

One place where the informational clutter can get sorted out is the CDC. In an encouraging trend, the agency is starting to make recommendations by explaining why they’re likely to improve public health. The agency cited good reasons people should avoid traveling for the holidays, including many combinations of those three C’s. They’ve just issued new guidelines recommending masks when people are indoors outside their homes or cannot stay more than 6 feet away from other people. And they’ve just shortened the quarantine period for people exposed to the virus from 14 days to 10, or seven if you get a test at the end. Again, the rationale was explained — some cases can incubate for two full weeks, but most people develop symptoms sooner. A shorter quarantine period can still cut down on transmission and will get better compliance.

It would be wonderful if the CDC could also start telling us which rules and recommendations are unlikely to work, so we can all concentrate on the ones that will. There’s some denial out there, but there’s also enormous curiosity and willingness to help. It’s a resource we can’t afford to keep squandering.

Faye Flam is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. She has a degree in geophysics from the California Institute of Technology.

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

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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, 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.