

OUR VIEW

Gov. Brown was wise to choose more transparency

Gov. Kate Brown has exerted exceptional authority during the pandemic. That means there should be more government transparency, not less.

Brown backed less transparency last week. Then, on Friday, Jan. 29, she wisely reversed her decision.

Gov. Brown directed the Oregon Health Authority in March 2020 to “share all COVID-19 information with the public that does not compromise patient privacy.” The Oregonian has carefully laid out what happened. The OHA began releasing basic information about each person killed by COVID-19. It included a person’s age, county, location of death, the dates of their positive test and death and if the person had underlying health conditions. The person’s name was not released.

It was essential information for the public to understand how the virus is killing people. Most importantly, it helps Oregonians understand that each death is the death of a person.

Gov. Brown on Thursday, Jan. 28, backed what she said was an internal OHA decision to stop providing the detailed reports. It suddenly had become too much work for OHA.

That was odd. OHA had been doing it for 10 months.

What was also peculiar was it followed Gov. Brown’s decision to make it a priority to vaccinate teachers before many seniors. The change would have made it more difficult to track how many seniors die as vaccinations they could have received went to teachers, instead.

And if that did not make you curious, the OHA decision to stop releasing the details because they were too much work was coupled with an OHA decision to release other details. The OHA has started releasing a breakdown of the underlying health conditions of those who have died from COVID-19. It had argued in August releasing that sort of information would create “confusion.” So now Oregonians won’t be confused?

Legislators challenged the OHA change. It was not just Republicans. Sen. Michael Dembrow, a Portland Democrat, asked OHA officials to reconsider, as The Oregonian reported.

“I believe that there’s real human value in seeing these individuals that we’ve lost each day, even if we don’t know their names, or really much about them at all other than their age and location,” Dembrow wrote. “Still, they come across as individuals, as more than a statistic. I value that, particularly in the midst of this dreadful pandemic, and I know many of you do as well.”

No decision Gov. Brown or OHA makes during the pandemic is going to be without tradeoffs. But who was Gov. Brown and OHA looking out for with this decision? The public’s cooperation hinges on the public trusting their government. Brown was right to reverse it.

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A clear message: Open schools

By Michael Bloomberg

America’s schoolchildren and teachers have just gotten some very good news from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After reviewing data from multiple studies in the U.S. and abroad, the agency has concluded that in-person schooling poses very little risk of coronavirus transmission as long as basic safety precautions are followed. That should send a clear message to governors, mayors and teachers union leaders: It’s time to open the schools.

In addition to the terrible toll COVID-19 has taken on the nation’s health, it’s been a calamity for American education. Only about 15% of school districts offered full-time in-person classes last fall. For students and parents elsewhere, the pandemic has meant navigating novel and often dubious remote-learning software. Any parent of a young child can attest that virtual instruction typically falls somewhere between subpar and hopeless.

The results have been alarming but not surprising. Early research suggests sharply reduced learning gains; widening racial disparities in achievement; and an eruption of anxiety, loneliness, depression and other mental health afflictions among students isolated from their peers and stuck at home. Some districts have seen a rash of suicides. Education analysts warn that the long-term consequences — for disadvantaged kids, for racial equity, even for America’s global competitiveness — could be disastrous.

In short, getting kids back into classrooms should be a national priority. More local leaders are recognizing that, but in some cases, districts have tried to reopen, only to be stymied by unions. In Chicago — which has one of the country’s largest school systems, and where more than 75% of students are economically disadvantaged — the union has simply defied the city’s reopening plans. In Montclair, New Jersey, the local union is blocking even two-day-a-week instruction. In Fairfax County, Virginia, the union got teachers moved to the front of the line for vaccines — and then decided that in-class instruction shouldn’t resume until vaccinations were ready for students. No vaccines are currently authorized for those under age 16.

Educators are understandably hesitant to return to work, and exceptions should be made for those in high-risk populations. But for the vast majority, the moment has come to return — and many are eager to do so.

To help more districts reopen, President Joe Biden should reassure union leaders that he takes teacher safety seriously. But he also needs to apply some pressure to states and cities. Funding from previous relief bills — more than \$67 billion, all told — has helped schools to pay for testing, protective gear, improved ventilation, added staff and more. Biden is offering an additional \$130 billion, and has rightly pledged sweeping federal support for schools that need it. But he should be clear that this is a two-way street. The government will do everything it can to ensure classrooms are safe; in return,

school districts must prioritize getting kids back at their desks.

Biden should also be willing to use the bully pulpit. His public support for reopening without delay can help give state and local officials, particularly his fellow Democrats, the kind of political capital they need to overcome opposition — and to then go further, by extending the school year into the summer and thinking more creatively about how to make up for lost time. He should urge labor leaders publicly and privately to get on board as well. His statement on Monday about the Chicago dispute — “The teachers I know, they want to work” — hit the right note. If such efforts fail, he should consider working with Congress to condition future aid on whether districts in low-risk areas are willing to open their doors.

The pandemic has demanded sacrifices from everyone. Hospital employees and first responders, who work in environments that are far more dangerous than classrooms (and who are also often represented by unions), as well as transportation workers and other public employees, have steadfastly done their jobs throughout this crisis, honoring their responsibility to their communities — and making the nation proud. Children — and all of America — need teachers to join them.

Michael R. Bloomberg is the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg LP, the parent company of Bloomberg News, and served as mayor of New York City from 2002 to 2013.

Your views

Check the state’s COVID vaccine eligibility tool

A few days ago I was viewing Oregon’s COVID website trying to determine when my wife and I would be eligible for the vaccine. I discovered the “COVID Vaccine Eligibility Tool.” This tool presents questions to determine eligibility for the vaccine. My wife is 66, very ill, and disabled; I am 68 and her only caregiver besides visits by home health. What I discovered was, despite being told by the state that we were in group 1D, because of our age and living at home, my wife’s illness qualified us for group 1A. We are getting the vaccine immediately.

I have read all the state’s official documents and listened to all of Brown’s news conferences on TV, not one mention of this qualification for the vaccine. If you are an adult or age eligible child with a medical condition or disability who receive services in your home, you qualify for Group 1A and can get the vaccine now! This person’s home caregiver, in our case me, also qualifies for Group 1A. Why was this information not freely given by Brown? Go to <https://covidvaccine.oregon.gov/> to use the Eligibility Tool.

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Letters to the editor

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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 administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, 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.

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Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Wittly. Board meets the third Thursday 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.