

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Sports are back, but the fans?

It's gratifying to see students from Baker High School and Baker Middle School playing sports again.

Students have missed so much during the pandemic, both in the classroom and on the fields and courts. Sports were canceled during the spring of 2020. The fall "mini-seasons" were an ersatz version, and the last of those seasons had barely begun when it ended due to a surge in COVID-19 cases.

But students, teachers and school staff have proved, since elementary students returned to their classrooms in October and middle and high schoolers in November, that they can learn in-person without spreading the virus.

Baker County's case rate dropped substantially starting in mid-January. The county has been in the lowest of the state's four risk categories since Feb. 12 and will stay there at least through March 11.

There was ample reason, then, for state officials to approve an abbreviated season for the traditional fall sports — football, volleyball, cross-country, soccer and cheerleading. All are underway in Baker schools. Games, meets and matches against other schools could start March 1.

Unfortunately, spectators won't initially be allowed at events for the fall sports season, which continues through March 19 for BMS and through April 10 for BHS.

Buell Gonzales Jr., the Baker School District's athletic director, said he will reassess the fan issue after games have begun, and that there is a possibility that a limited number of fans could be allowed.

In the meantime, Gonzales said the district will livestream home events and, possibly, contests at other schools.

Taking precautions during the pandemic is understandable. And Gonzales' plan to focus on making sure the actual competitions happen, then looking at allowing fans, is sensible.

So long as Baker County is at the lowest or the moderate level for risk under state guidelines, it should be feasible for the district to allow some parents and other fans to watch Baker students compete at home events (the district has no say over games at other schools).

For counties at the lowest risk, the limit for outdoor events is 300 people total, including participants and fans, and for indoor events it's 50% of the venue's maximum occupancy. If Baker County moves to the moderate-risk category, the limits would drop to 150 for outdoor events and to 100 for indoor events.

Those limits obviously don't allow for the usual crowd for a football game at Baker Bulldog Memorial Stadium. But there is ample space, between the grandstand on the west side of the stadium and the bleachers on the east side, to accommodate a limited number of fans and ensure social distancing. So, too, for volleyball matches in the BHS and BMS gyms.

Soccer matches at the Baker Sports Complex have an advantage in that spectators can see the field relatively well from the parking area. For a cross-country meet at, for instance, Quail Ridge Golf Course, fans could easily spread out as well.

The situation is a bit tenuous, to be sure.

And even with the higher limits for counties at the lowest risk, the number of fans who want to attend in some cases likely would exceed the available capacity.

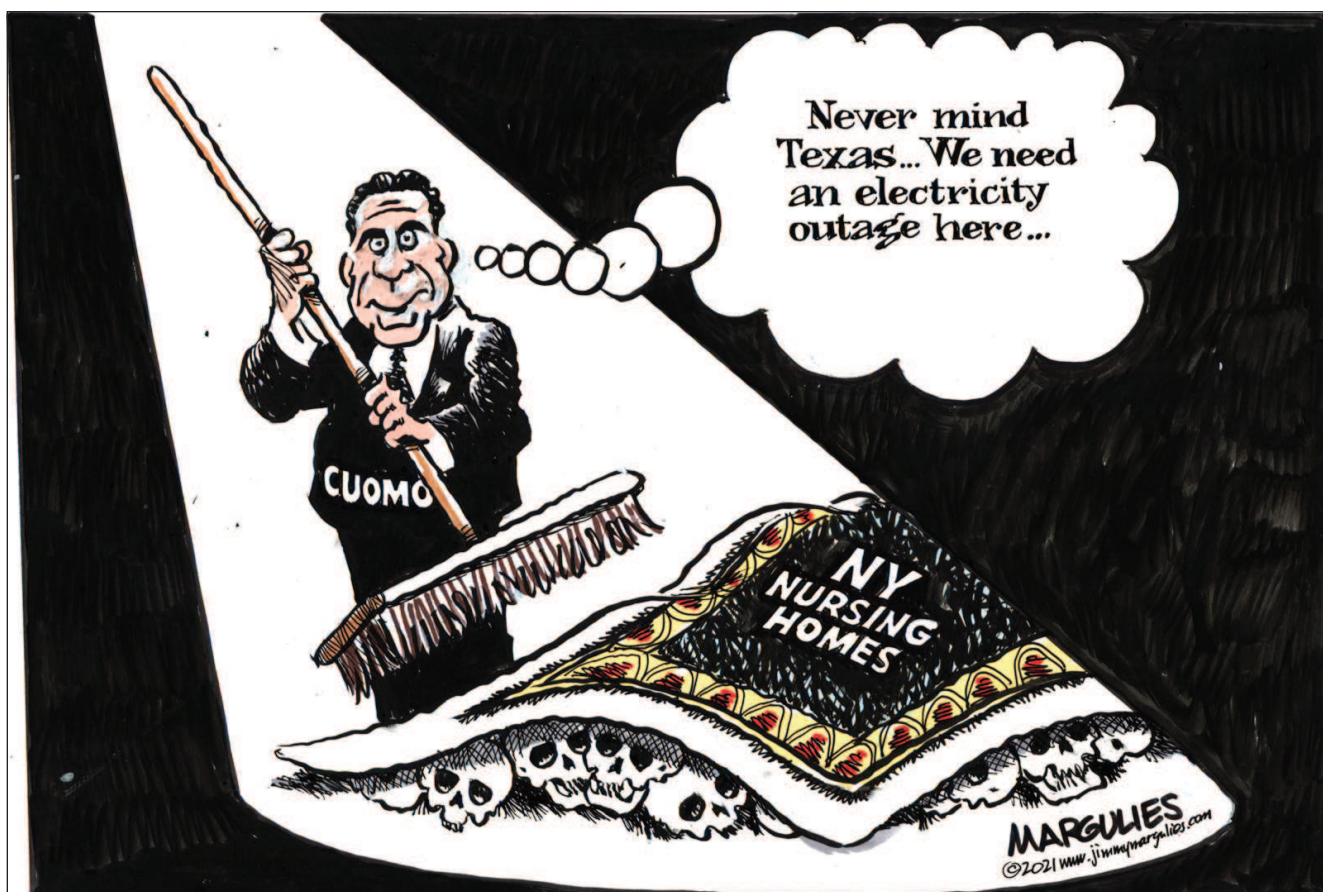
But students deserve to have an audience when they return to competition. And parents deserve to have a chance to watch at least some of their kids' games.

It won't be normal, of course — no student cheering section making enough noise to echo through the stadium or gym.

But what has been normal over the past year?

Even a muted version of the familiar is something to cherish in 2021.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald



Your views

Quiet zone, school bond will improve our community

I hope city residents and new city council members will support two efforts to improve the health and safety of our community. Public safety is more than just law enforcement and health is more than medical treatment. A train whistle Quiet Zone will improve all our lives, and the health and learning ability of our youngest community members. Yes, the voters rejected the measure in 2002, but it had a fairly high price tag at that time. Voters also recently rejected a school bond. I don't think that means they reject the idea of public education or safe learning en-

vironments. I think it means they don't want to pay that much for it. Now that the price tag could be very low to zero (for city taxpayers) and Quiet Zones have established a record of increasing community safety, it makes sense to do something that makes all Baker citizens safer, even those who cannot vote, show up at council meetings, write letters to the editor, or post on Facebook.

The school district is proposing another school bond that is significantly smaller than the last one, and one that will bring in an equal amount of state funding. At 66 cents/\$1,000 of property value I think this generation of property owners should fund the safe edu-

cation of today's children in the same way that our education was supported by our parents' generation of property owners. For my family, the increase in property tax equates to less than \$10 a month. For that trifling amount, kids get warmer, more efficient classrooms and safer schools. One school gets a new roof and middle schoolers get a cafeteria. I cannot think of a better investment in our city and our future.

Both these efforts will make Baker a safer and better place to live, learn, and thrive. Our children should be our top priority.

Barbara O'Neal
Baker City

Learning more about the virus

By Chris Janetopoulos

There is much confusion regarding COVID-19 spread — understandable given the evolving nature of the data set and the proliferation of misinformation. Before children head back to school, it's critical their teachers and parents understand the risks.

It has been demonstrated that all ages can be infected by the virus, and the older you are, the more likely you are to have complications. While rare, very serious illness and death can occur in children, and preconditions in children and adults can contribute to hospitalization. Multiple studies have come in the past month demonstrating school attendance does not appear to play a strong role in COVID-19 spread and that opening schools has had little direct effect on community transmission.

National Geographic was recently given exclusive access to an Icelandic study that provides some clarity on transmission between individuals. Scientists from the Directorate of Health and deCODE genetics out of Reykjavik monitored every citizen in the country after being potentially exposed to COVID-19 during spring 2020. Children were defined as under age 15 and found to be half as likely to be infected; they were additionally half as likely as adults to transmit the virus. Interestingly, almost all of the COVID-19 transmissions to children came from adults.

Other data has suggested underlying mechanisms that may account for these findings. While the ACE2 receptor has been implicated in infection and appears to be downregulated in most children, an additional study out of Vanderbilt University found that an enzyme that helps chop up the spike protein increases in expression in adults. This processing is thought to assist viral entry into the cell, and its presence in certain cells of the lungs correlated with COVID-19 infection. In addition to having a strong innate immunity and more diverse antibody repertoire that protects against CO-

VID-19 infection, children may also be protected because they lack proteins needed for infection of certain cells in the lungs.

As the data continues to accumulate, a picture is starting to emerge that makes scientific sense regarding the differences in infectivity and disease we are seeing across age groups. When children do get infected, the majority quickly eliminate the virus. Therefore, the time that they are infectious is shortened, providing less duration for them to infect their cohorts, and potentially limiting their symptoms. Given it may take a larger dose of virus to become infected if you are a pre-adolescent child, overall transmission between children should be lower.

On the other hand, adults have a weaker innate immunity, and they also have the proper proteins expressed in their lungs permitting infection, so it may take a smaller viral load for an adult to get infected from a child. Conversely, adults, because they are poor at clearing the virus, are infectious longer, may have higher viral loads, and would typically develop worse symptoms. Adults also have a larger lung capacity and would expel air for further distances, which would have a greater likelihood of infecting everyone. Additionally, the older you are, the more likely you are to have dysregulated immune function and preexisting conditions. Taken together, numerous properties of the virus, your immune response and your physiology work together to determine the probabilities of infectivity and disease.

This model suggests that teachers and staff, and adults in general, should be cautious around children, but even more so with other unmasked adults, including colleagues at breaks and lunches. Lastly, it is important that researchers carefully determine the degree to which children, or subsets of children with preconditions, infect one another, as it has implications for who should have priority for vaccinations.

Interestingly, it is now well accepted that asymptomatic individuals are

contributing to the spread of COVID-19, with estimates suggesting that nearly 60% of all spread occurs in this manner. This percentage will likely vary, depending again on the probabilities outlined above. Nevertheless, since asymptomatic individuals are not sneezing or coughing, this provides further support that normal breathing and talking, along with singing, leads to transmission and is further evidence for the role of smaller aerosols in driving this pandemic. Microscopic aerosols can travel beyond 6 feet, and this needs to be carefully considered in the transmission of COVID-19. This is critical, because it means that the closer you are to inhaling the air that someone else exhales, the higher your probability of getting infected. This may also mean you are not safe if you are more than 6 feet away, especially indoors with poor air circulation. An elegant contact tracing experiment in South Korea recently provided evidence that one can be infected, even when on the other side of a restaurant, when individuals were not wearing masks, and air flow carried these tiny aerosols across the room.

So, while hand-washing is good hygiene that should be encouraged, this is a respiratory virus spread largely by aerosols, and the probability of getting live virus from your hands or a surface into your respiratory tract appears small. COVID-19 transmission can be dramatically curtailed with mask wearing, which children generally don't mind, and once their teachers are vaccinated, the risk of COVID-19 spread to the students and vice versa drops significantly. Regardless, it is important for our politicians to remember that our teachers should be treated with respect as we make these critical decisions.

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Letters to the editor

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