

EDITORIAL

Don't punish schools that end masking

The decision by Oregon state health and education officials to end the statewide mask mandate for schools on March 19 — moved up from the original March 31 — is reasonable.

But only partly.

Officials apparently aren't content to simply make the decision that almost every other state has made and that data clearly support — to end the mask requirement without reservation because masks are no longer necessary to control the virus among students and staff.

School districts can make masks optional on March 19.

But those that do so — and Baker 5J Superintendent Mark Witty said he expects the district will be among them — might be treated as though their decision isn't wholly sound.

State officials, in announcing the pending cancellation of the mask requirement, didn't exactly emphasize a detail — districts that drop the mandate will no longer be able to allow students' negative results with a rapid test to shorten or avoid the quarantine period, what's known as the "test-to-stay" policy that's been in place this school year and is designed to keep students in school as much as possible. Instead, students in districts where masks are optional would have to stay home for five days if they're determined to be a close contact of someone who tested positive for COVID-19.

Marc Siegel, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Education, told The Oregonian that the agency plans to issue new guidance soon related to quarantine periods. That guidance should drop the differential treatment for districts that end required masking next month.

Schools in Baker City and elsewhere have navigated the pandemic with aplomb. And now that the omicron variant — which poses an infinitesimal risk of serious illness to students — is waning rapidly, neither mask requirements nor punitive rules for districts that make masks optional is justified.

The end of masking in schools should be a celebratory event, a recognition of the sacrifices that students and staff have made. State officials need to embrace this progress rather than overreacting to a virus that we are learning to live with.

It's not 2020.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

The journalist-politician has worked well for Oregon

It is unfortunate that Nicholas Kristof won't be on the Oregon Democratic primary ballot for governor.

Kristof and former state Sen. Betsy Johnson were the two candidates who did not neatly fit into the tradition of electing Democrats beholden to public employee unions. As the former Republican Secretary of State Dennis Richardson once said during conversation at The Astorian, "The public employees unions run the statehouse."

In different ways, Kristof and Johnson would have brought fresh ideas to this race for governor. Johnson has yet to flesh out her message, but Kristof's was clearly about human welfare — the vast swath of displaced and damaged Oregonians. His nationally published articles and books are about the travails of common people in turbulent times. One of those books is about drug addiction among Oregonians whom Kristof knew while growing up in this state.

Some referred to Kristof's national and international journalism as though that made him a novelty candidate. But Oregon has enjoyed good luck with journalist-politicians. Three of our prominent officeholders have been journalists. One of those was Oregon's most conse-



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quential governor of the 20th century.

Charles Sprague owned the Oregon Statesman newspaper in Salem. As editor, he wrote editorials and a widely read front-page column, "It Seems to Me." He became Oregon governor in 1939 and served through 1943. Sprague was a Republican in the Theodore Roosevelt Progressive tradition. His defense of civil liberties put him at odds with the GOP's right wing.

Today's Oregon Republican Party would turn their backs on the man. To learn more about Sprague, read Floyd McKay's biography, "An Editor for Oregon: Charles A. Sprague and the Politics of Change."

Tom McCall and Richard Neuberger were journalists of a different sort, but they had a symbiotic relationship. McCall began as a sportswriter in Idaho and became one of Oregon's most prominent television journalists, as a news analyst for KGW-TV. Neuberger's prodigious output appeared in The Oregonian, from the time he was 18, and subsequently

in national magazines that collectively reached a broad demographic.

Conservation was a paramount value — a theme in many of Neuberger's articles. By the time he was elected to the U.S. Senate as a Democrat, Neuberger had built a national constituency among conservationists, and they were elated at his victory. Brent Walth in "Fire at Eden's Gate" describes Neuberger as McCall's "role model." When Neuberger died at the age of 47 in 1960, McCall took up the cause of conservation and became Oregon's most prominent conservationist.

In other words, Oregon's three prominent journalist officeholders carried positive, inspirational values into the arena and left their mark.

The important distinction between Neuberger and Kristof is that Neuberger served in the Oregon House of Representatives and the state Senate prior to the U.S. Senate. Neuberger had done a legislative apprenticeship — all of which he wrote about.

Nonetheless, it would have been useful to have an injection of Kristof's perspective in the race that lies ahead.

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COLUMN

Remembering a great team — and a great writer

I don't know what I was doing while the Baker High School boys basketball team was trying to win a state title on the night of March 25, 1972, but I'm pretty sure I was wearing a diaper.

And drooling, more than likely.

In my defense, I was 18 months old. Which explains my underclothing, my uncouth habits and my inability to conjure a memory from that night nearly half a century ago.

Over the past few weeks I've listened to many people describe that memorable night when the Bulldogs nearly upset the dominant Jefferson Democrats before a record crowd of 13,395 people in Portland's Memorial Coliseum.

(A record, moreover, which lasts to this day and which, given the comparatively paltry audiences at championship games over the past couple decades, is not likely to be threatened.)

This series of interviews yielded the story, published in the Herald's Feb. 24 issue, about that 1972 Bulldog team that finished second to top-ranked Jefferson.

The few hours I spent chatting with players from that team, and others associated with it, has prompted in me that peculiar compulsion, that yearning which must remain forever unfulfilled, to understand the experience in the way that only those who were there can truly understand it.

To know what it was like.

To hear again, at the great distance

of five decades, the squeak of sneakers on polished hardwood and the background hum of the crowd swell to a crescendo with each crucial basket.

To smell the popcorn.

To fully absorb the ambience.

Ann Ross, whose late husband, Daryl Ross, was the leading scorer on the 1972 team, told me he had a film of the championship game.

It would be a fascinating artifact to watch, certainly.

But it could never replicate the pure and powerful sensory experience of having been inside the Coliseum on that night.

My frustration at being denied that experience is tempered to a great degree by my gratitude to those who shared their recollections.

These organic treasures trump, in important ways, even a film of the game.

Video can't convey the excitement as vividly as the players' voices did.

Their enthusiasm was so palpable that I could sense that unique magic which infuses a person's memories — their ability to effortlessly erase all the years which have passed and to pull to the present fragments of the past, their original power still intact.

Those four days in March remain a milestone in the history of Baker High School sports.

And I would argue that because the accomplishments of students, both on the court and elsewhere, are so integral to the legacies of small, remote



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towns, that period is also a landmark for the city as a whole.

It would of course be hyperbolic to suggest that a high school basketball game could ever become the obsession for everyone in a city with nearly 10,000 residents.

Surely there were Bakerites in March 1972 who were uninterested in what a bunch of crewcut kids were up to in Portland.

Undoubtedly there were some who didn't even know the tournament was happening.

Yet I doubt there have been many periods in our city's long history, dating to 1864, when so many of its inhabitants were so focused on the doings of 11 local young men playing games 300 miles away in Oregon's biggest city.

I'm glad the players will be honored for their accomplishments. The ceremony, originally set for Feb. 25, has been moved to next season.

I only wish that two of them — Ross, who died in 2015, and Mark Davis, who died a year later — could be there.

I'm sure I would have enjoyed talking with them, as I did with their teammates, and that their memories would have enriched the story of that legendary team.

as sweetly in the ear as an exquisite melody.

Their styles and subject matter could scarcely be different — White's writing is controlled and conversational, while O'Rourke was revered as a purveyor of "gonzo" journalism and reveled in exaggeration, occasional profanity and nearly hallucinogenic allusion and metaphor.

But both produced work of such consistent quality that they have always seemed to me of a pair.

White died in 1985.

And now that O'Rourke is gone I feel that hollow despair that comes when you realize you'll have to do without new material from a craftsman whose work you admire so much.

Although perhaps that's not quite true.

I suspect O'Rourke has unpublished work that will eventually be available.

Until that happy day, I'll have to be content with the sections of my bookshelves that sag slightly with the weight of what he and White produced. This great bounty continues to enrich a world where it seems at times that the wondrous possibilities of the English language are increasingly devalued in favor of the trite and ersatz, whose defining quality is that they fit on a small, bright screen.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.