

Schools

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So in response, 10 students from four Bend High schools — Summit, Mountain View, Bend High and Realms — created the Bend-La Pine Schools Student Union last week. The group posted a critical statement about reopening on Instagram Thursday, and it plans to send the Bend-La Pine School Board a list of reopening demands.

“We feel that in the district’s eagerness to return to normalcy, they have sidelined important concerns of safety,” the group wrote in their statement.

Jace Bracelin — a Summit High junior who founded the group — said Bend-La Pine’s reopening plan is too vague, and students and families don’t have enough details to choose between in-person learning or staying in online distance learning.

“This is a decision of life or death for a lot of immunocompromised students, and they need to know if returning is going to be safe, or not safe,” Bracelin, 17, told The Bulletin. “And with the amount of details with the district has released right now, we can’t quite know.”

Middle and high school students in the district are scheduled to return Feb. 8 to in-person classes — unless they chose distance learning or Bend-La Pine Schools Online. Bracelin said the union’s goal isn’t necessarily to push back that date, unlike groups of teachers at Bend High and Summit who had asked for that.

“In a perfect world, we would like a postponement of reopening until vaccinations are open to the general public, and teachers are able to get both shots,” Bracelin said. “But we understand that’s probably not going to happen.”

However, the Redmond School District did just that Friday afternoon, delaying its reopening from Feb. 2 to Feb. 22.

The Student Union’s list of demands had not been finalized yet as of Friday afternoon, Bracelin said. This is because the teens are taking the time to ensure they’re presenting compelling and fact-based arguments to school leaders, with corresponding potential solutions, he said.

“It’s a waste of both our times to point out problems and not try to fix them,” Bracelin said.

The group has no intention of being antagonistic with district leadership, Bracelin said.

“I don’t want any of this to look like we think the school district is evil, or acting with malicious intent,” Bracelin said. “We just think the plan of reopening, as it is right now, is not good enough for us to return with a peace of mind.”

Bend High senior Jade Jager, a member of the student union, said she wants to push the district to strictly enforce COVID-19 rules such as mask wearing. And if a student tests positive for COVID-19, she wants the entire school to do distance learning for two weeks minimum, she said.

If a student tests positive, the state department of education recommends sending home all other students who have direct contact with that student.

Jager also plans to give the school board the results of her online petition, posted Jan. 7, which asked Bend-La Pine Schools to hold off on reopening until students and staff can be vaccinated. As of Friday afternoon, nearly 2,100 people had signed the petition.

“Hopefully that should show the district the public distaste for their plans,” Jager, 17, told The Bulletin.

Another member of the group, Bend High junior Maxwell Friedman, said he was upset that students and staff wouldn’t have their temperatures screened before entering the building every day. He’s also worried about enforcing social distancing in the cramped hallways of Bend High.

But in general, Friedman said he’s confused why schools are reopening now, when local COVID-19 case counts are much higher than they were in the spring, when schools initially closed.

“To expect us to go back to normal, just because a new year rolled around but circumstances regarding the coronavirus haven’t changed at all, is a bit confusing and frustrating,” Friedman, 17, said.

Friedman said the union plans to stick around after COVID-19, so students can continue to have a say in Bend-La Pine Schools.

“I definitely see Bend-La Pine Schools Student Union existing in the future, and I’m excited to see what would come from it,” he said.

Bracelin emphasized that the student union has no affiliation or connection to the Bend Education Association, Bend-La Pine’s teachers’ union.

In a statement to The Bulletin, Carrie Douglass, chair of the Bend-La Pine School Board, said the board appreciates hearing from students but defended the district’s reopening plan.

“I believe we have met or exceeded all safety guidelines, requirements and recommendations and that we have mitigated the risk in all possible ways,” she wrote. “If the students have additional ideas that we can implement, we will certainly consider them.”

Lora Nordquist, superintendent of Bend-La Pine Schools, did not respond when asked for comment.

■ Reporter: 541-617-7854, jhogan@bendbulletin.com

Coronavirus during Christmas

U.S. largely avoided surge, but experts warn threat could intensify

BY FENIT NIRAPPIL

The Washington Post

The United States appears to have avoided the worst-case coronavirus scenarios that officials feared would overwhelm hospitals in the aftermath of Christmas and New Year’s gatherings. But experts caution that the threat from the virus has not diminished and could intensify with the emergence of new variants.

Even as hospitalizations begin to stabilize, they do so from record heights. The country’s hospitals averaged more than 130,000 COVID-19 patients a day over seven days this month, far exceeding summer and spring surges. The death toll from cases contracted before and after the holidays will stretch into February. Authorities reported nearly 4,500 deaths Wednesday, a new single-day record.

Cases skyrocketed at the start of 2021, approaching a seven-day daily average of 250,000 around Jan. 10 before declining. But the toll on the health-care system was softer than expected.

Hospitals had braced for enormous spikes in patients that could have forced rationing care, exhausted already limited beds and sparked a nationwide shortage of health-care workers. But officials across the country said those dire predictions — a wave of severe Christmas cases weeks after a rapid increase from Thanksgiving — did not materialize in most places.

“The surge on top of a surge that could have happened didn’t really happen,” said Erin Bromage, a biology professor at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. “We dodged a bullet, and we’ve done better than we could have, but we are still in a pretty



Travelers arrive or wait Dec. 23 at Reagan National Airport in Arlington, Virginia.

Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post file

terrible spot.”

Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious-disease expert, said at a White House briefing Thursday that cases appeared to be plateauing, but he warned it could be a temporary slowdown.

Hospital leaders and experts are still on edge. Variants of the coronavirus, including the B.1.1.7 strain that originated in Great Britain and is believed to be 50 to 70% more contagious, could result in further case spikes in cold weather months when people are more likely to be indoors.

“It’s like a pot of boiling water, so the temperature may have been turned down some, but it’s still dangerously hot,” said Carmela Coyle, chief executive of the California Hospital Association. “Plateauing is not a good thing.”

Thanksgiving spike

Infections soared in the aftermath of Thanksgiving, leading some to fear an even greater surge after back-to-back

Christmas and New Year’s celebrations where people would gather with family and friends and then travel back home, potentially spreading the virus with each step. The Transportation Security Administration recorded its highest number of airline travelers since the pandemic began around Christmas, exceeding 1 million daily.

Experts have floated several theories for why the holiday season dealt less damage than expected. Some people may have changed their behavior after seeing the Thanksgiving spike, such as by celebrating outdoors, limiting gatherings to immediate family or quarantining before Christmas. More people who have contracted the virus could be receiving treatment at home while the sickest patients are hospitalized.

Robert Kaplan, a medical professor at Stanford University who was among those raising alarms about a holiday surge, said hospitalizations appear to be dipping in states that

already had high caseloads and rising in those that had lower caseloads.

“There may be some places in the country where there are fewer people eligible to get sick because they’ve already been infected,” Kaplan said.

Los Angeles County faces one of the worst crises, with officials taking steps to conserve oxygen needed to treat COVID-19 patients struggling to breathe and 11% of intensive care beds still available.

Researchers and county health officials released new projections Wednesday offering some good news: Hospitalizations have leveled off with enough ventilators to treat patients, and declines in admissions are projected, even under conservative estimates.

The bad news: Even with declining caseloads, the stress on hospitals will be so high that bed shortages will continue. Those who have been admitted are coming in with more severe cases of COVID-19 and are more likely to die.



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