

WHAT OTHER EDITORS SAY

Teachers must share urgency to reopen schools

THE OREGONIAN EDITORIAL BOARD

Gov. Kate Brown's order directing Oregon's public schools to reopen to all grades by April 19 goes a long way to removing roadblocks keeping so many students at home.

The order, issued Friday, instructs her health and education directors to review school-reopening requirements and revise them in order to "facilitate the return" to classrooms. Loosening rigid restrictions about space requirements, student group size and other factors — while still following federal guidance — will help schools solve what has become an impossible logistical puzzle.

It's a huge step forward that embraces the science behind the safety of reopening schools, bolsters Brown's decision to prioritize educators for vaccines and shows her sincerity in wanting to relieve the burdens Oregon's youngest have had to bear.

But for some districts, including Oregon's largest, a final piece remains: an agreement between the district and teachers that spells out working conditions for reopening.

While Brown's executive order clearly sends a message to those at the bargaining table to find compromise, teachers in some districts have delayed efforts to reopen or drawn out negotiations. With time running short, teachers, districts and families must wholeheartedly shoulder that goal of reopening schools this year, accept the pragmatic over the perfect, and commit to working through the inevitable mistakes and changes along the way.

Certainly, districts must deliver on a safe plan for reopening, including investing in ventilation improvements and technological infrastructure. They must also map out school days and student groups to minimize potential COVID-19 exposure while offering instruction to students face-to-face and online.

Union demands excessive

But some requests by teachers go beyond what's reasonable or within a school's control. For example, Portland Association of Teachers' proposal calls for holding off on in-person instruction until the tri-county region achieves a less than 3% positive test rate over three weeks and can trace 95% of contacts of a COVID-19 positive case within 24 hours — a tougher standard than even the guidance that the union frequently cites.

It is also seeking hospitals' assurances that they have sufficient personal protective equipment.

But even on instruction matters, the union isn't reflecting the urgency that many families feel. Union representatives boycotted a negotiation session to protest the district's now-scuttled plan to have educators simultaneously broadcast their in-person class to students tuning in from home. Now, the union is seeking flexibility for individual schools

in making instructional and scheduling decisions, a move that would be hopelessly impractical.

Such big asks aren't uncommon in bargaining, but they do slow down progress. Elizabeth Thiel, president of the Portland Association of Teachers, said the union is focused on the district's planned start date, but teachers want a plan that protects community safety and doesn't degrade instruction for those who opt to remain in distance learning.

She added that the district's preliminary instructional plans don't adequately focus on meeting students' socializing needs, and that it must have strategies in place to deal with students' mental health needs.

Shape what's possible

She's right to push the district on thinking creatively about how to meet instructional needs in a way that promotes socialization. And ideally, schools would have a phalanx of counselors and mental-health supports before students come back.

But we're in an emergency. We need our schools, teachers and community to act pragmatically to offer sufficient safety, access to instruction and emphasize getting kids in buildings as soon as possible.

Reopening schools isn't just about stemming the significant academic losses and absenteeism that we're seeing. It's also about what we're not seeing — the profound toll on students that's been hidden from view by distance learning. Only now, as some schools reopen, is that suffering becoming apparent.

Consider Coquille School District, which has had all grades back for some in-person instruction since January. Superintendent Tim Sweezy asked school counselors last month what they're seeing.

Extreme harm happening

The results were bracing: More than two dozen students shared that they were suffering from abuse — physical, sexual, emotional and verbal. Thirteen students had become homeless. Three were in counseling after talking about or threatening suicide. Others said their parents were struggling themselves and couldn't help them. Some won't eat out of fear of taking off their masks.

Coquille's counselors are stretched so thin, that he's hiring another. "We are in crisis across multiple grade levels and for a variety of reasons," he said. This is the harm in keeping our schools closed.

Reopening will be a bumpy, flawed, exasperating process, just like last year's switch to online learning. But we cannot put it off until fall. Oregon's students should not have to wait any longer.



Central Oregon crossroads

Are we moving fast enough to protect our waterways?

BY SCOTT CHRISTIANSEN

Editor's note: The following is part of an ongoing, twice a month series of columns regarding climate change and its ramifications for Central Oregon.

Water management conflicts are not hard to find. Globally, agriculture consumes most of the fresh water (65-90%, depending on country). This past year in Oregon, fish and farms were both in trouble. Heavy reliance on irrigation during the 2020 drought dried up Wickiup Reservoir.

Bend was established as an agricultural community. Historically, the U.S. government encouraged farmers to settle the West using incentives, such as interest-free infrastructure loan repayments for irrigation districts and repayment relief in years when farmers were under stress. With signs of trouble ahead, we are changing course in several ways, but are we doing so fast enough?

Trends depict agricultural water use in the Western U.S. According to the USDA's Economic Research Service, inefficient flood irrigation has been decreasing and pressurized sprinkler irrigation has been increasing over the past 40 years; however, neither method is the best technology for use in Central Oregon because of seepage and evaporation from volcanic soils that are highly porous and have low water retention capacity.

Better irrigation methods

Farmers and ranchers can now invest in more efficient irrigation equipment. For example, Low-Elevation Sprinkler Application (LESA) irrigation systems improve irrigation application efficiency to as high as 97% by reducing water losses due to wind drift and evaporation from the top of the plant canopy.

By delivering water close to the ground, water is better targeted to plants so less water and energy for pumping are needed to meet crop water requirements. Irrigation equipment manufacturers and distributors have developed retrofit kits to convert existing pivots or wheel lines into LESAs reconfigurations.

GUEST COLUMN

Subsurface drip irrigation

More efficient methods exist for intensification of hay production using subsurface drip irrigation. Netafim, one of the most advanced irrigation companies in the world, developed a subsurface drip tape that is buried 8-12 inches deep in the soil to deliver precise amounts of water and fertilizer to alfalfa that can raise production by 25-40%. It is used successfully in California where the system has shown it can pay for itself in three years.

The links

Golf courses have been criticized for their perceived negative impact on the environment. Water use for golf courses generates significantly greater economic activity compared to alternative water uses like residential lawns and even field crops; however, many courses built in the 1970s, '80s and '90s now have aging, out-of-date irrigation, drainage, tees, bunkers and greens that need retrofitting or replacement. Golf course designers will probably not turn to AstroTurf because plastic divots can't be replanted and the turf radiates heat in the summer — but you might anticipate a downsizing from 18- to 12-hole courses.

The Journal of Golf Course Management wrote a technical report about water-use efficiency for golf courses. Water use on an average-sized course (103 irrigated acres) in the northwestern U.S. was 97,885,761 gallons per year. During the irrigation season in Central Oregon, usually from April 15 to Sept. 30 (168 days), this amount of water is equivalent to about 582,653 gallons per course per day. Within a 30-mile radius of Bend, there are at least 20 golf courses and others being planned that collectively consume millions of gallons of water per day.

Water savings at home

Domestic water conservation can also save large volumes of water. The

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Environmental Protection Agency lists several things that you can do to save water. For example, if an average-sized lawn in the U.S. is watered for 20 minutes every day for seven days, it is like running the shower constantly for four days or taking more than 800 showers. A household with an automatic landscape irrigation system that is not properly maintained and operated can waste up to 25,000 gallons of water annually.

Nonrevenue water (NRW)

Formerly termed "unaccounted for water," NRW is water that has been produced and is "lost" before it reaches the customer. In a study on the state of U.S. urban water use, data from over 160 drinking water or wastewater utilities in U.S. cities were collected to determine water demands. Almost 15% of water treated across the United States never reaches the consumer because of physical loss or theft. This is considered a good level compared to many other parts of the world. Fortunately, the data for Bend in its Water Management and Conservation Plan show a NRW percentage of 3.8% averaged over 2008-2015.

Summary

It appears that we are reaching the tipping point where there is no longer enough water to go around for all sectors. If the day has indeed arrived when there is not enough water for lawns, golf, hay and fish, we will need to allocate, and price water based on the highest public good. There are many ways to improve our water use if we choose to do so.

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Many are starting to face the anxiety of leaving COVID-19 behind

BY LUCY MCBRIDE

Special To The Washington Post

Invitations are usually welcome. This one makes me sweat. "Let's get social! Join us for an in-person May soiree!" A group of my medical colleagues, all vaccinated, are proposing a gathering inside a Washington, D.C., restaurant.

The mind races. What about masks? Will there be hugs? Handshakes? Do I remember how to make small talk? What would I possibly wear?

I'm a primary care doctor. I've been vaccinated against the coronavirus, but I'm not immune to the complex feelings that transitions invite. Like my patients anticipating the shift to post-pandemic life, my brain is buzzing with anxiety and ambivalence, rational thoughts and irrational fears.

We have been yearning to be done with enforced distancing, social isolation and life in a more virtual reality. Now that the moment has arrived —

as millions of Americans have been vaccinated and millions more will soon roll up their sleeves for it — the prospect is oddly disconcerting.

My patients, too, have mixed feelings about the "new normal." Conditioned to stay home and to distance from others, they often express disbelief when I assure them that, once vaccinated, they can hug loved ones, dine indoors and even gather, unmasked, with another household of unvaccinated people.

Pre-COVID, my teenage kids talked about FOMO, a Fear Of Missing Out. But upon reentry, many of us will face something new: FONON, or a Fear Of Normal.

Trauma has a way of doing that to us. We've lost more than 500,000 lives in this country alone. We've suffered unprecedented economic, social and emotional upheaval. And regardless of our individual pandemic experience, each of us has faced some level of loss, grief and despair.

The pandemic will end. With dropping case rates and three incredible vaccines robustly protecting us from COVID-19, soon we'll be able to relax the restrictions of pandemic life. Just this week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidelines outlining the activities that the fully vaccinated can safely resume.

Return to normal

But now that we've adjusted to pandemic life, it's understandable to experience emotional whiplash even as trauma recedes.

I see it in my office every day. From specific worry about being infected with the coronavirus to generalized anxiety about resuming normal activities, pondering our future can generate ambivalence and even outright fear.

There is no one-size-fits-all prescription for this reaction. But my advice to patients — and myself — is akin to recommendations for anyone who has

experienced a major life disruption.

We start by naming and normalizing the trauma. Identifying it as such allows us to unlock a set of tools known to help people after life-altering events. Normalizing helps reduce self-stigma and the stress of feeling unwell.

Identifying emotional roadblocks to normalcy is critical. For some, the thought of socializing indoors or relaxing other COVID-19 rules generates anxiety.

To mitigate the expected anxiety, we assemble a kit of coping tools. I commonly recommend breathing techniques, guided meditation, regular exercise, prioritizing sleep and spending time in nature, all of which tamp down stress hormones.

Using facts to talk back to anxious thoughts is also essential for halting endless loops of irrational worry.

Simply practicing normalcy will help, too.

The science is clear. The vaccines protect us from illness and help prevent transmission, too. They will allow us to reconnect with loved ones and to resume in-person school, work and worship without fear.

Vaccination against COVID-19 is crucial for our health and safety. So are naming, normalizing and navigating fears about reentry. Just as before COVID, risk will still be everywhere. But navigating a new normal — and the possibility for post-traumatic growth — is achievable with patience, self-awareness and humility.

With a mix of reticence and relief, I click "RSVP YES!" to my colleagues' party and take my first step toward reentry. The next step? Buttoning my pants.

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