

Local schools ensuring kids have access to food and chances to keep learning

Most districts preparing meals to go during mandatory school closure

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

As Grant County classrooms sit empty in the coming weeks, school officials and staff are ensuring that students have access to food and opportunities to learn as the coronavirus spreads and state officials say indefinite closures are a real possibility.

"I know this is a difficult time for our families and staff," Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptmor said. "This is a time that is unprecedented in our schools."

Uptmor said he wants students and parents to know the district is diligently working on finding alternative solutions to give students equal access to education during the closure.

"In the coming days, ODE will be providing a compilation of possible resources for school districts that may be helpful to support student learning and family and community engagement while schools are closed," Uptmor said. "Many of the answers people are searching for have not been determined or guidance is getting refined and distributed as accurate answers are available."

Uptmor said the district is sifting through the ever-changing guidance on social distancing and crowd limitations. For that reason, the school board canceled the meeting scheduled for Wednesday, March 18.

Also, he said, the school district is suspending all related travel for conferences and meetings.

He said the state should have additional guidelines that that will direct future board meetings.

Uptmor said the facilities at Grant Union, the gym and the field, are closed for use during the school closure.



Eagle file photo

Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptmor.

Grant School District students can pick up breakfast and lunch Monday through Thursday, March 30 and March 31 at the designated locations and times:

- Seneca, lunch at 11:30 a.m.
- Humbolt, breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and lunch at noon.
- The Seventh Street Complex, breakfast at 7:45 a.m. and lunch at 12:20 p.m.
- The bowling alley parking lot, breakfast at 7:50 a.m. and lunch at 12:25 p.m.
- Mt. Vernon Park, breakfast at 8:20 p.m. and lunch at 12:20 p.m.

Prairie City School District students can pick up boxed meals from 9-10 a.m. Monday through Thursday, March 30 and March 31 at the school.

Monument School District Administrative Assistant Shawna Schafer said the district will provide hot lunches to go for students at 11:30 a.m. Monday through Thursday, March 30 and March 31 at the school. She said they are also giving breakfast to take home for the following day.

Long Creek Superintendent Carl Coghill said there always challenges when there is a school

closure. "It comes down to how do we educate these kids when they're not in the building," said Coghill.

He said roughly 15-20% of the students have an internet connection, and if they do it is questionable. He said that some of the staff might not have access to the internet as well.

"It is a matter of solving things one at a time and passing along information as it comes along," Coghill said.

Coghill said he has reached out to students and their families to see if the school can drop off breakfast or lunch to students and families during the school closure.

Dayville Superintendent Kathryn Hedrick said her staff sent students home with food baskets on Friday after the governor's announcement.

Hedrick said the timing of the closure will make it to where students will miss just four days of school.

"We are hoping to just miss four days," Hedrick said.

Hedrick said the teachers sent students home with things to do in the meantime.

Schools figuring out how to feed students during closure

By Les Zaitz
Oregon Capital Bureau

In a matter of hours, the need to close Oregon schools came into sharp focus for Gov. Kate Brown.

Schools, she was told, expected to quickly run short of staff as concerns deepened over the new coronavirus.

In the night hours of Thursday, March 12, Brown pushed out the word — every public school in Oregon would close on Monday, March 16.

Across Oregon, school districts are scrambling to put together entirely new systems for packaging and delivering meals to all students. State officials are considering adding flexibility for licensed child care facilities, aware that parents are faced with choices about what to do with their children.

None of that was because children were becoming infected, Brown told reporters Friday. Public health officials say that so far children generally seem to suffer mild symptoms that can be cared for at home if they do contract COVID-19.

Colt Gill, state deputy superintendent of public instruction, said state and federal health officials made clear to Oregon authorities that "sending children home will not stop the spread of coronavirus."

Instead, school employees considered vulnerable to the disease, particularly those 60 and over, were rapidly deciding to stay away from schools.

That ranged from substitute teachers to bus drivers to cafeteria workers who tend to about 580,000 children in Oregon's public schools.

Through much of last week, Brown resisted any move to shutter schools.

On Sunday, March 8, Brown declared a state of emergency when the number of people testing positive for the disease doubled overnight to 14. State agencies issued guidance that then recommended against closing schools but urged increased hand washing and cleaning of schools and "social distancing" by staggering recesses and lunch periods.

Three days later, Brown issued new orders aimed at containing the virus.

This time, schools were directed to cancel field trips, parent conferences and competitions.

That day, Brown said, she held a conference call with school superintendents. She said she heard a "universal commitment" to keep schools open, in part because of the deep effect closing them would have on vulnerable families.

"A lot of these kids don't necessarily have direct access" to meals, health care and other services they get at school, Brown said.

She went before reporters the following morning, restating that stand and assuring Oregonians that everything was being done to safeguard schools.

"Considerations of school closures would be a last resort," she told Oregon.

A series of subsequent calls with school superintendents and others culminated in a conference call just hours later — at 4 p.m. Thursday, March 12 — that convinced her she could no longer leave schools open. Other states already were beginning to order statewide closures, and Oregon school districts were considering acting on their own to turn off the classroom lights.

School superintendents, union officials and state education authorities were on the call with the governor, who was working from Portland. Her chief of staff, Nik Blosser, and her policy advisers on education and health joined in.

One message came through, Brown said: "They are struggling to even staff their schools at this point" in a circumstance pushing school systems to "the breaking point."

She said 40% of Oregon's substitute teachers are 60 or older — a population that shouldn't be in contact with kids. She said school districts also rely heavily on that demographic for bus drivers and the "lunchroom ladies."

The Oregon Education Association, representing many of the state's teachers, added its voice to push for the closure as it learned that more and more school employees were voicing reluctance to work at school.

State puts a stop to visits to nursing homes to prevent spread of coronavirus

By Les Zaitz
Oregon Capital Bureau

State officials on March 10 mandated a stop to visits to the 30,000 Oregonians in long-term care facilities to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus that has proven especially deadly for the elderly.

That means, for now, no more time with parents, grandparents and others in licensed facilities except in special circumstances.

"Our number one priority is to stop the spread of this virus," said Fariborz Pakseresht, director of the Oregon Department of Human Services.

Pakseresht and Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority, announced the new restrictions last week that affect 670 nursing homes, assisted care facilities and residential care facilities.

"Oregonians in our nursing homes are particularly vulnerable to this disease," Allen said.

They said those who operate 1,700 adult foster care homes and anyone caring for an elderly Oregonian at home should also follow the state's guidance.

Under the new restrictions, visits to the care facilities will be limited to what the state called "essential individuals."

That includes facility staff and vendors, state ombudsman and staff, family and friends attending to

an end-of-life circumstance and those "essential" to the "emotional well-being and care" of residents.

The extraordinary step comes as data from around the world shows that the elderly are most vulnerable to the coronavirus that causes the respiratory disease COVID-19.

State health authorities also directed the facility operators to limit community outings and work to arrange "virtual visits" for their residents.

Pakseresht said it would be up to individual facilities to determine who was "essential" to visit.

"It's not something we can define centrally," he said.

He also said that it would be up to facilities to decide how to tell residents about the new restrictions, which will be in place indefinitely.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, state epidemiologist, said none of the state's presumed cases of infected Oregonians includes anyone from a long-term care facility. He said, however, that residents of such facilities have been among those tested, although he didn't provide any details.

Tests to determine whether someone is infected are conducted through medical swabs sent to the state's central health laboratory.

Pakseresht said Oregon officials are taking every step they can to avoid "the tragic situation develop-

ing in Washington," where deaths have mounted among those in a Kirkland, Washington, long-term care facility.

State officials said they urged those caring for

elderly relatives or friends follow similar guidance.

They also recommend that the elderly should stay home as much as possible and when in public avoid people who are sick or close

contact with others. The elderly should stock up on food, medications and other supplies to minimize their risk of infection from going out.

Allen said Oregonians

need to take the situation "incredibly seriously," abiding by the state's restrictions and guidance.

"We're asking people to do some really hard stuff," Allen said.

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Hello Grant County!

Today I woke up to about 5 inches of snow! Although it was beautiful, I was really looking forward to more of the sunny 50- and 60-degree days we were having earlier this month!

I know Spring isn't too far away, and I'm looking forward to it. Springtime is Grant County is so beautiful!

The March meeting of Chamber Board of Directors has been canceled for this month. There will also be no luncheon on Thursday, March 19th.

As you have probably heard, Cycle Oregon is coming to town September 12-19, 2020 for their Painted Hills Classic Bicycle Ride. This is exciting news! The event will begin and end in John Day.

There are several opportunities for local organizations to volunteer for various jobs to be done during the event.

Cycle Oregon will make a contribution to the group either in the form of a check or grant from the Cycle Oregon Fund.

The Grant County Chamber of Commerce is the Community Manager for John Day.

We are responsible for assigning groups for the various jobs and distributing and collecting the agreements between the groups and Cycle Oregon. Contributions for the work done will be mailed directly to each group. If you are interested in obtaining a job list, please contact us via email: gadmin@gcoregonlive.com or call us at 541-575-0547. The list is also posted on our website: www.gcoregonlive.com. Take care and stay well!

Tammy Bremner Manager, Grant County Chamber of Commerce

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