

Prairie City gets an early start on distance learning

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

While many schools in Grant County began distance learning on April 13, Prairie City decided to implement the new program on April 8 to give time to find bugs and provide students with the supplies needed.

On April 8, staff and faculty from Prairie City hand-delivered a packet to every student that had directions on how to get into Google Classroom and how to use the application, according to Casey Hallgarth, the superintendent for Prairie City. The packets also included contact information for the teachers and their availability times.

"We decided to send our stuff out on Wednesday (April 8), and we did that so we can work out some kinks, and we knew we were going to have some difficulties with laptops to mitigate the work on (April 13)," Hallgarth said. "For the most part, it went well, and we handed out around 80 laptops to kids."

Some of the packets were not as full as others because the school was aware of students who had internet access and didn't need the additional paperwork for school work.

Students who do not have internet access will continue to receive packets every Wednesday. These packets will include the information and assignments that can be found on Google Classrooms.

Hallgarth had the opportunity



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz

On April 8, Prairie City School started distance learning and hand delivered packets to students.

to see the reaction of several kids in pre-school who were on their device with their parents, learning from the teacher online. The kids were fascinated by the technology and being able to see and learn from teachers on a screen.

Some of the problems Hallgarth noticed was in getting people started

with technology and signing into classes.

"Our hiccups have been trying to have students and parents understand the teachers' directions on getting access to the online applications and getting the equipment set up for the parents to go out," Hallgarth said. "If you hand someone a piece of paper

that I am not used to seeing these directions and messing with a device you have never been on before — its all foreign for some of these parents."

It's been a shift for teachers as well. Billy Colson, a middle and high school math teacher at Prairie City, hadn't facilitated an online class prior to the pandemic.

"I work with an amazing group of small school math teachers throughout Eastern Oregon, and I'm amazed by what they are able to do with technology, and there is a lot of online things you can do," Colson said. "I'm making links to tutorial videos, and I'm also trying to give them things they're familiar with and refer to our curriculum when I teach."

Colson said challenges have been getting students used to a new computer program and motivating them to do work after an extended spring break.

"About 10% of kids will excel at it, but most kids need more interaction from people," Colson said. "Hopefully, kids will be more familiar with video conferencing or calling us with questions as time goes on."

One goal for the school is to not overwhelm students with school work and make sure to have a balance between work and a student's well-being.

"We are not here to overwhelm parents and students with a ton of work," Hallgarth said. "We are here to give them our support and teach them a little bit, but we also want to make sure everybody is doing well socially and emotionally."

Hallgarth said a majority of staff is available from 7:45 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays by phone for students to call if they have any questions.

School leaders react to school buildings being closed for year

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Gov. Kate Brown announced school buildings will remain closed for the 2019-2020 school year in Oregon, and even though school leaders anticipated the change, it wasn't easy to accept.

"The school closure for in-person instruction for the remainder of the year was a hard reality despite many of us anticipating it," said Monument Superintendent Laura Thomas. "While it is most important that everyone, students, families, and staff remain healthy, the feel of the school is not the same without the students. We miss the students!"

Long Creek Superintendent Karl Coghill said he misses the interactions with the students.

"The building is so quiet," he said. "It is very strange."

Lots of questions have come up since the announcement, but the heartbreak for seniors and their parents are certain, according to Prairie City Superintendent Casey Hallgarth.

"We knew this was coming," Hallgarth said. "It's just once someone gives you the final verdict, it's like someone gut punched you. It's official for our seniors that they are not coming back to our schools, and that's the gut punch."

Other school leaders also shared their sentiment of how tough this change is because of the importance of senior



Eagle file photo

Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptmor.

activities.

"All of us are miserable — those events are rites of passage to adulthood," said Kathryn Hedrick, the Dayville superintendent. "Our seniors deserve public affirmations of their achievements, and they deserve the celebrations like proms, sports competitions and senior banquets."

Oregon Department of Education encouraged schools to plan for alternative graduation ceremonies with the possibility of not allowing in-person gatherings.

"This group of seniors will miss that (graduation) in the traditional sense, and we as a high school in the district area are looking for ways that we can continue that celebration, which might be virtual or off-schedule," said Grant School District Superintendent Bret Uptmor. "We are going to try to make sure we try and recognize our seniors."

While plans for graduation

ceremonies are uncertain as schools look for ways to commemorate the occasion, Hedrick said it is important for every senior being recognized for their accomplishment.

"We will do something: Dayville will have two graduates, and their graduation is as important as a class of a 1,000," Hedrick said.

To honor seniors, schools around the nation are participating in turning on their football field lights at 8:20 p.m. — which corresponds with 2020 in military time — for a minute for each senior graduating this year.

On April 9, Grant Union Junior-Senior High School turned their lights on for 43 minutes to honor their seniors. Prairie City will turn on their stadium lights every Wednesday at 8:20 p.m.

With distance learning now being the focus for the rest of the year, school leaders are aware and are grateful for parents putting in hard work to



Eagle file photo

Prairie City School District Superintendent/Principal Casey Hallgarth.

provide for their families and assist with education at home.

"While staff is meeting

with students over the phone multiple times per week, providing instructional videos

and assignments, parents are having to take a more leading role in the daily education," said Thomas. "While this has been an adjustment, all the amazing students, families and staff have come together to support and help one another to make this less than ideal situation the best we can for the students."

School buildings may be closed, but school leaders and teachers are still assisting students.

"I want parents and students to know that we are there with them," Coghill said. "We are willing to do everything we can to help them and the students to get through these tough times."



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Happy 100th Birthday!

Evelyn Ogilvie of John Day turned 100 on April 13th!

