

Grant superintendent urges local control after Gov. Brown's K-12 mask mandate

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant School District's superintendent is pushing for local control after Gov. Kate Brown said students in kindergarten through 12th grades would be required to wear masks to prevent COVID-19 in the upcoming school year.

Brown, on Thursday, directed the Oregon Health Authority and the state Department of Education to create a rule to require masks indoors for K-12 schools statewide for the 2021-22 school year, in line with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recently updated guidance.

Grant School District 3

Superintendent Bret Uptmor said the district had planned to have local control since June and that the board had not taken a position on a mask mandate.

The school district, Uptmor said, had been working on finalizing its plans for the 2021-22 school year when Brown made the announcement.

"Our preparation for the school year was predicated on us having local control of decisions," Uptmor said in a Friday press release. "I believe we can provide the safest learning environment using our data to assess the danger of COVID in our district."

Uptmor said the governor's announcement surprised him for a couple of reasons. First,



Eagle file photo

Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptmor.

as a superintendent of schools, he said he hoped there would have been enough trust to let the school district know the mask mandate was coming beforehand.

"We didn't know anything about it," he said.

Second, he said, the state disregarded the other parts of the district's plan requirements entirely, including physical dis-

tancing and vaccinations.

"We have a lot of things that we're trying to do to make sure our kids are safe, and this (masking) is only a portion of it," he said. "It's not the entire plan, and I think we can manage wearing masks and not wearing masks locally."

Uptmor said he recommended masks in the draft plan that he sent to the board.

He said community members told him they did not want the schools to require face covering. He said some pleaded with him to consider that position when making the plan, and he said he did consider not requiring masks.

"There may be others out there that would rather have

masks," he said. "But the ones I've heard from are all saying no masks."

Uptmor said the board would be discussing the district's plan and a parent letter at the board meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Grant Union High School's old gym.

In the meantime, Uptmor said that he would like input from residents before the meeting. He also urged citizens to "reinforce" his advocacy for local control by contacting their elected representatives and state officials.

"I believe I have more of the students' interest in mind by the actions that I take, rather than a blanket, 'everybody has to wear a mask' mandate," he said.

Oregon announces Grant County's \$10,000 vaccine incentive winner

Seven new COVID-19 cases reported in last week

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Seven residents over the last week have tested positive for COVID-19 as the Grant County Health Department reported Tuesday a resident in the John Day ZIP code tested positive.

Meanwhile, the Oregon Health Authority announced Tuesday that Patricia Amling was Grant County's \$10,000 winner in the statewide vaccine incentive drawing. The state pulled winners randomly from a database of vaccinated Oregonians on June 28. It awarded \$10,000 to one person in the state's 36 counties, five \$100,000 scholarships and a \$1 million grand prize.

According to My Oregon News, Oregon's state news website, the odds of winning the \$10,000 in Grant County were 1 in 2,500.

The county's vaccination rate as of Tuesday is at 43%, up from 40% last week.

State health officials reported 1,056 new positive cases Friday, bringing the state total to 221,799 since the pandemic's beginning. OHA reported five new COVID-19 related deaths in the state, raising the death toll to 2,863.

In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control reported over 79,000 new cases Aug. 1, bringing the nationwide total of 35,039,644 since the beginning of the pandemic.

Gov. Brown orders masks worn inside state buildings immediately

Brown: Delta variant more contagious

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown Friday ordered mandatory masking inside state buildings, an order covering workers and visitors whether vaccinated or not.

The edict — "effective immediately" — was the first major mandatory action taken in Oregon following a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report on Friday saying the delta variant of COVID-19 was faster and stronger than first thought.

"The science and data are clear: The Delta variant is spreading in our communities and is more contagious," Brown said in issuing the order.

The order came on a day when the state reported 1,076 new cases and three deaths.

It's the third time in the past four days that the state has reported over 1,000 cases. Oregon hasn't averaged 1,000 cases per day since the height of the pandemic last winter.

Brown would not be issuing any additional mandatory orders on Friday, spokesman Charles Boyle said in an e-mail.

The governor is keeping track of the situation, and OHA officials are in contact with the CDC and other states.

"We are working with hospitals and health care providers to maintain hospital capacity," Boyle said.

The increase in Oregon mirrored the delta variant's impact across the United States. On Tuesday, the daily number of new cases topped



PMG file photo

Gov. Kate Brown, at a 2020 press event, wearing her social distancing mask in public.

100,000 for the first time since early February.

Oregon has now reported 2,858 deaths since February 2020. There have been 612,343 deaths nationwide.

Worldwide, the virus has killed over 4.2 million, equal to the entire population of Oregon.

Brown said the mask mandate would protect frontline state workers as well as the public coming to the buildings for services.

States have started to take more aggressive actions this week as the delta variant originally found in India in May has become the dominant of four "variants of concern"

identified by the World Health Organization as offshoots of the original virus first seen in China in late December 2019.

"The war is changing," said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention late Thursday.

It released data on Friday showing the variant as much more contagious than estimated. Data also showed that, while vaccinations kept individuals from severe illness or death, mild or asymptomatic infections in vaccinated people were as likely to spread the virus to unvaccinated individuals as contagion from those infected without vaccination.

The Oregon Health Authority released a new forecast showing that, if current infection rates continue, new cases could top 1,170 per day for the two-week period beginning Aug. 4.

At current infection rates, hospitalizations would rise to 95 per day. The forecast hedged in both higher and lower possible outcomes.

If the rapid delta variant raises concerns among residents, it could drive up vaccination rates, which have fallen below 5,000 new inoculations a day from an April high of 50,000 or more on a few peak dates.

Additional voluntary masking — all that is currently demanded in Oregon — could cut transmission, along with an increased concern leading people to make personal choices to reinstate social distancing and other pandemic protocols.

But, the report also noted that much of its data came prior to the accelerating spread over the past week. The hospitalization numbers were from July 20 data. The report noted that a review showed hospitalizations up 77% during that period.

Brown did not change her June 30 order turning over public health decisions to counties.

Since that time, cases and hospitalizations in areas with low vaccination levels and high infections have spiked. Many hospitals outside of the Portland metro area have reported running out of intensive care unit beds. The number of ventilators in use for COVID-19 patients doubled to 41 since last week.

The spike will accelerate, according to the OHA forecast.

Health officials say each infected person could be passing the virus to about two additional people.

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