

OPINION

In trying times, students come first

The Hermiston School District has an excellent track record of planning for the future. But as we have learned in the last eight weeks, even the best-laid plans can go awry.

When developing curriculum, hiring staff, and creating a budget for the 2019-20 school year, we never could have foreseen a health crisis that would change our lives so quickly and so completely.



Dr. Tricia Mooney

We've had to rethink every aspect of our district, from the way lessons are taught and received to the way our facilities and district office operate.

Schools exist first and foremost to support students. If we're not working to meet basic student needs, we're not providing the service taxpayers demand of us. With that guidepost in mind, our first step in response to the initial school closure was to ensure students would continue to get the nutrition they need. We worked with Chartwells, our school meal provider, and Mid-Co, our transportation provider, to establish meal delivery options that continue to evolve. In addition, according to the closure guidance, the district made supplemental learning resources available for all students.

As further guidance came from the state and schools were shut down for the remainder of the year, our focus also shifted to making sure every student had the ability to continue their education at home for the remainder of the school year.

Teachers began training on new digital platforms to instruct their classes remotely. Our IT department worked to bridge the technology gap and make sure every student could participate and continue to learn.

In a matter of weeks, we had a system in place to distribute Chromebooks to every student who needed one and install Wi-Fi routers in areas of town with limited internet access. Teachers began delivering virtual lessons, meeting with their classrooms by video conference, and providing printed lessons for students to take home if they preferred. With a focus on compassion and connection, every student has been able to continue moving forward with their education rather than losing three months of instruction.

We realize this does not match the

academic rigor of classroom instruction. But our teachers have been versatile and made the most of the current situation. I could not be prouder of the way they have rallied together to support our students. This will be especially important as life returns to normal and our students return to school.

Education is a process. Each grade leads to the next, and students' relationships with their classmates and teachers carries on from one year to the next. Our staff has shown through their dedication and compassion that every student's journey is important, and we're not willing to give up when things get difficult.

Our senior class has been particularly hard-hit by the closure. Some of the most memorable moments of an academic career have been altered significantly. We're working to make sure we give these soon-to-be graduates the recognition they deserve as they end their time in the Hermiston School District.

The plan for honoring each of these individuals with diplomas will still take place on June 4. It will be different than any other graduation we have seen in Hermiston, just as the class of 2020 is unique from any class before them. As details of the celebration are finalized, we will share them with our community.

We could not have foreseen the events of March and April 2020, and certainly don't have a crystal ball to know when things will return to normal or what that new normal will look like. But what I do know is that the Hermiston community has shown amazing support for our students and staff. This town cares about its schools and it shows.

Students come first, and that means we want to support their families, too. Everyone has adjusted to these circumstances that are beyond our control, and we want to keep the dialogue going, especially as we aren't able to meet in person every day. If you have questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to your teacher, principal, or to me directly at tricia.mooney@hermiston.org.

We're learning every day how to better meet the needs of our students, and we're doing it through the thoughtful feedback or our staff and community. We're in this together, and we'll get through this together.

Dr. Tricia Mooney is the superintendent of the Hermiston School District, serving the largest student population in Eastern Oregon.



A banner at the corner of Main Street and Third Street in Hermiston is available for graduating seniors to take photos.

Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Businesses finding ways to honor graduating students

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

After years of families supporting local businesses, Hermiston Downtown District wants to show its support for high school seniors and their families.

Members of the district put up signs all along Main Street on Monday afternoon, congratulating area seniors on their upcoming graduation. Judy Currin-Pederson of Lucky Endz Gifts, president of the downtown district, said they hope seniors take some time to drive through downtown and see the signs in their honor. There is also a large banner at the corner of Main Street and Third Street where they can take selfies or a family portrait in their cap and gown.

"We just want people — with social distancing, obviously — to come down and do a photo," Currin-Pederson said.

The photos and banner were the brainchild of Teri Thompson, owner of American Printing. Thompson said she wanted to do "a little something" to make sure



Judy Currin-Pederson, of the Hermiston Downtown District, places a sign in front of a Main Street business congratulating graduating seniors.

Staff photo by Jade McDowell

students felt recognized even though their school year was disrupted by COVID-19.

"I wanted to have a wow factor for the the grads, since they're not getting to have their normal graduation," she said.

Hermiston School District has announced that it will hold some sort of graduation celebration for students on June 4, even though it won't involve a traditional commencement ceremony with everyone together.

"It won't be a group," Superintendent Tricia

Mooney said. "We won't have all the seniors together in a room like has been traditional, but they will have an opportunity to walk across a stage and be handed their diploma in a cap and gown."

The *Hermiston Herald* and *East Oregonian* are also planning to honor graduating seniors the week of May 27, with a special section distributed with the newspapers that features the senior photos from Umatilla County and Morrow County schools, and sponsored messages of congratulations from businesses.



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