

Local teachers will still be in classrooms for distance learning

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
STAFF WRITER

The classrooms may be virtual this year, but local teachers will still be expected to work from their physical classrooms this fall.

Sept. 8 promises to be a first day of school like no other for the Hermiston School District as the state will require it, and most other school districts in the region, to start the year with distance learning. But Hermiston, and other schools in the area, will still require their teachers to educate their students from an empty classroom.

With Hermiston still the local epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, the district’s administration and teachers union now find themselves on opposite sides of the issue.

Although many teachers taught from home when the state shutdown schools last spring to slow the spread of COVID-19, Hermiston Superintendent Tricia Mooney defended the district’s work policy for the 2020-21 school year.

Mooney said the district wants teachers in classrooms because that’s where all of their educational technology and equipment are, not to mention the administrators and instructional coaches who are on hand for support.

She added that there would still be precautions put in place on campuses, including limiting the amount of time teachers spend working after hours on nights and weekends so the custodial staff can clean and sanitize.

If staff members have an underlying condition that makes them vulnerable to COVID-19, Mooney said the district is working with employees to make accommodations.

The Hermiston ZIP code has suffered one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in the state, with more than 1,400 total cases since the onset of the pandemic.

In an emailed statement, Lareul



Desks sit empty ahead of the impending school year on Aug. 13, 2020, at Sunridge Middle School in Pendleton.

Woodward, president of the Hermiston Association of Teachers, was critical of the district’s rules.

“Every Hermiston educator is committed to ensuring our students feel loved and supported during this crisis, and that they continue to receive the best education possible regardless of the teaching format our schools use,” she said. “The district’s decision to require large numbers of educators to work together out of a shared building while the COVID pandemic numbers are high in our community not only puts the health and wellness of our district employees and our community at risk, it does nothing to improve the quality of education our students will be receiving.”

Hermiston isn’t the only district with this rule.

Pendleton School District Superintendent Chris Fritsch said Pendleton has a similar policy with exceptions made for staff members with underlying health issues.

Fritsch added that parents are

expecting a higher quality education after last year’s sudden transition to distance learning, and teachers operating out of a familiar and resourced environment like the classroom was one of the ways Pendleton could meet that expectation.

The Pendleton area has the county’s second-highest total of COVID-19 cases at 478, but Fritsch said teachers should stay isolated enough in their classrooms to avoid a situation where the virus might spread.

For many districts the goal remains to return to in-person learning. Although the number of cases in Umatilla County has ebbed in recent weeks, local schools are still far from meeting the state’s requirements for comprehensive in-person education.

But Mooney took heart in the county’s downward trend and said it’s evidence that practices like social distancing, hand washing, and the use of face coverings were working.

“We need to stay the course for what we’re doing,” she said.

USDA extends funding for free student meals

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Eastern Oregon students could get more free meals after the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced it was extending its funding options for districts in light of COVID-19.

Umatilla and Morrow county school districts leveraged USDA funding to provide free breakfast and lunch for all students during the spring when school was first shut down, and to offer their usual free summer meal programs.

In the Hermiston School District, the district had previously planned to resume charging students for breakfast and lunch when the school year begins on Sept. 8, but Superintendent Tricia Mooney said on Sept. 1 that the USDA announcement might mean that students who do not usually qualify for free or reduced lunch can continue receiving free meals.

“We did see that, and we are awaiting further instruction from (Oregon Department of Education) on that, but we do anticipate moving in the direction of offering more free meals,” she said.

She said the district would still likely hand out meals at fewer bus

stops than they have been, due to staffing constraints, but parents should be on the lookout for announcements about the district’s new plans in the upcoming days.

Hunger-Free Oregon, a nonprofit, issued a statement commending the USDA’s decision, which extends funding flexibilities to school districts through the end of 2020.

According to the organization, the number of children in Oregon experiencing “food insecurity” has increased since the pandemic began from one in eight children to one in three.

“As school buildings closed and families lost income in March, school meals became more important than ever — a real lifeline that is essential to stay healthy and engaged in learning, and supports communities in crisis,” Annie Kirschner of Hunger-Free Oregon said in a statement.

“If these waivers hadn’t been extended, daily meals would have been unaffordable for many families,” Kirschner said. “Kids would have been without food, which is unacceptable. We’re glad that the federal government listened to the concerns of parents and educators.”

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