

**Open:**

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returned to the classroom yet. Brown put the number of students getting at least some in-person instruction at 160,105 students — less than 30% of the state's total student population, according to ODE data.

"I am using this phased approach because, as we have seen from school districts that have returned to in-person instruction successfully, schools will return our youngest learners to school first, and apply the lessons learned from that implementation process to reopening middle and high school buildings," Brown wrote.

Most Eastern Oregon schools had already brought at least their youngest grades back to the classroom, however, and all Umatilla and Morrow County school districts' plans included bringing back all students before the governor's deadline.

Some, like Stanfield School District, had the space to bring all students back for full days while still maintaining social distancing and small cohorts of students. Others have been offering a hybrid schedule, with students divided into two groups and going for half days or every other day.

Hermiston School District had previously announced that it planned to return middle school students to the classroom for half days starting March 22 and high school students on April 12, which would meet the governor's deadlines. Kindergarten through third grade students have already returned, and fourth and fifth grade students will transition to a hybrid schedule on Monday, March 8.

Superintendent Tricia Mooney said the governor's announcement is a "step in the right direction" toward bringing all Oregon students back, and it has been exciting for Hermiston School District staff to see some students back in the classroom already.

She pointed to the statement in Brown's letter to OHA and ODE directing them to provide updated safety guidance to districts by no later than March 19, and said those updates to regulations, such as how many students are allowed in a cohort, will play into the district's plans for bringing secondary students back.

Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe said her district's plans remain in place. Umatilla brought back elementary school students over the past week and started middle and high school stu-

dents on hybrid learning on Monday, March 8.

Sipe said she was excited to see all students back to the classroom part time.

Leaders of Oregon's teachers union responded to the announcement with a nuanced message, expressing support for a return to in-person learning, but repeating their emphasis on safety precautions.

"We hear, understand, and share the frustration expressed by many in our communities about the uncertainty this pandemic has caused for our public education system," said the statement signed by dozens of local union presidents, "and the long-standing educational disparities that continue to be exacerbated by reopening plans that fail to truly center student equity."

The union message calls on leaders in school districts where agreements haven't been reached to continue bargaining "in good faith with local educators to craft plans that will truly serve all of our students."

Brown's announcement comes as Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation begins offering COVID-19 vaccines to students in the wake of a recent uptick in reported cases among teenagers, according to a press release from CTUIR officials.

The new vaccine effort extends to high school students 16 and over and school employees in the Pendleton, Athena, Helix and Pilot Rock school districts who have yet to be vaccinated, the press release said. The vaccine allocations to the CTUIR from Indian Health are not governed by Oregon Health Authority eligibility requirements.

Initial reactions to Brown's announcement were mixed. On Twitter, some replied to her tweet about the change by asking why students hadn't been returned to the classroom earlier if the science was, indeed, clear that risks were low. Others asked whether "the science" she was looking at took into account the newer, much more contagious variants of COVID-19 beginning to circulate or whether there would be any money for schools to implement safety measures, such as ventilation for classrooms.

Next Tuesday, March 16 marks the one-year anniversary of the governor's orders to close all schools to in-person instruction.

*Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter Elizabeth Miller and Oregonian reporter Eder Campuzano contributed to this report.*

**Music:**

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with, and to be able to practice harmonizing with other sections' parts.

She said there is a lot to miss about the old way of doing things, particularly the social aspect and "beautiful" connection that comes from making music together. But teachers interviewed for the article also said they had seen students pushed to significant improvement on a technical level as they have had to work on a much more individual level.

"They're not feeding off that musical energy together, but they are individually getting better," Bemrose-Rust said.

Sandstone Middle School band teacher Daniel Allen said he thinks students will come out of the experience with more tenacity and the ability to take responsibility for their own learning. They have also been able to do some fun collaborations with other schools. But he said he misses the communal aspect of making music together, and it has been an adjustment moving more toward giving students feedback on recordings they send in rather than working with them in the moment.

"In normal years we're standing in front of the class and everything's in real time and we can hear something and stop the group and fix something right then," he said.

For HHS band teacher Sean McClanahan, working virtually with students who play a wide variety of instruments means a careful set-up in his classroom where instruments ring the desk where his camera is set up, making it easy to grab whatever instrument he needs.

"I'm looking forward to getting back to a time when I can sit down and make music with the kids again," he said.

When high school students return to the classroom later this month, McClanahan said the district has been studying best practices recommended by large studies on safely practicing music amid COVID-19. Like other classes, band and choir students will only meet with half the group at a time and will be

spaced at least 6 feet apart. Special measures for music classes will range from using bell covers on instruments to wearing certain types of masks for choir students.

**Making learning fun**

As distance learning hasn't been as conducive to rehearsing music together, music teachers have tried to introduce new concepts to the curriculum.

Cooley, who teaches choir for

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Sean McClanahan, Hermiston High School band teacher

both Sandstone and Armand Larrive middle schools, said she has tried to come up with fun ways to engage students with music. She did a unit on music in movies and had students put together their own short film with musical score and background sounds. Later, they were asked to write a quarantine-themed parody of a famous song. In one example Cooley provided, student Abby Goller and her father Josh Goller sang "I just can't wait to be free" to the tune of the Lion King's "I just can't wait to be king."

They also watched the musical "Newsies," and are now learning the music to it.

"This is the most excited about singing I've seen them so far this year," Cooley said.

She and other teachers said distance learning has been met with mixed reactions from students. Some show up only when they have to, with cameras off and audio muted. Others are still enthusiastic about participating, and come in for teachers' "office hours" over Google Classroom to get one-on-one help in the afternoons.

When Cooley asked students to send her what the most challenging thing about online learning and the things they have enjoyed, Delaney Wieseler replied it was hard learning the notes to a song over a computer, but it was fun doing video edits. Others also mentioned they liked the special projects,

but said it was hard learning new technology and keeping track of assignments.

"One thing I like about online school is that when we are recording we have multiple opportunities and we can go back and re-record but in real school you only have one shot at singing good at a concert," Carolyn Follett responded.

**A difficult spring**

Teachers had the summer to prepare for what the current school year might look like, but had an abrupt end to the previous school year. Bemrose-Rust's students had a choir concert the night that school was shut down. They thought it would be postponed temporarily, but those students never did get an opportunity to show off their work. The high school production of "Grease" shut down, and various festivals and competitions students would have traveled to were called off. They also missed out on field trips to Disneyland, Hawaii, Silverwood and a chance for Sandstone Middle School students to perform at Carnegie Hall.

Cristian Mata, Armand Larrive Middle School band teacher, said one of the things he was saddest about canceling a year ago was the annual "instrument petting zoo" that allows middle school students to check out their options for participating in band and choose an instrument they would want to play. It has been an important recruiting tool in the past.

"That was the most damaging thing, is there were some kids that didn't know that this was an option," he said. "... We were growing and then we couldn't do that one small event that had a really big impact on our incoming sixth graders."

As a result, he said his and Allen's beginning band classes are less than half the size they would usually be.

While concerns about COVID-19 spreading are still present, the teachers interviewed said they are very excited to see students back in the classroom again, even if it will look different for the time being.

"We're working so hard for those kids — nights, weekends, personal time," Bemrose-Rust said. "We do want to make it work and we are there for them."

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