

FFA:

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but I've made lifelong friends," she said.

She said even though some members of the chapter have been able to get together to film presentations and a few things like that, she does miss the past experiences like late nights together in hotel rooms at competitions and early morning trips to Dutch Brothers.

Conner said she appreciates the network she has stepped into as an FFA member, and loves meeting former FFA students out in the community who are now very supportive of current FFA members.

"They've been in our shoes before and I know for sure the people who have been in this room before are so passionate about FFA," she said. "They carry it with them through their whole lives."



Hermiston FFA students gather for a meeting.

Shandie Britt/Contributed Photo

Connections after high school

Kellie Bray, the chief of staff for CropLife America, is one of many former FFA

students who continues to make connections because of her FFA past. She and her twin sister participated in FFA growing up in Mis-

souri and she later became the state FFA secretary. The experience allowed her to travel to Washington, D.C., for a national FFA gather-

ing, and she later returned to the city for her career and helped found an alumni chapter of FFA there. She said through the

alumni chapter she has had fun connecting with FFA students who visit Washington, D.C., for national leadership conferences. Bray said even for students who don't go into agricultural fields, FFA taught her life skills. The organization's parliamentary procedures element, for example, teaches students how to properly run a meeting.

"(As an adult) you can tell who has had that kind of experience and who hasn't," she said. "It's so beneficial to have someone how knows how to do that."

Shandie Britt, the current FFA advisor and agricultural sciences teacher at Hermiston High School, said if high school students aren't sure if they might like FFA, she would encourage them to come to a meeting and see what types of learning experiences are available.

"FFA is a place for everyone," she said. "It offers an opportunity for people to find out who they are."

Rally:

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However, Dean Sidelinger, Oregon's epidemiologist, said the state would only do so in a gradual manner. Afterward, on Monday, March 15, the Oregon Department of Education released updated guidelines that altered some rules, but left the 6 foot one in place for now.

"I think gradual approaches are appropriate," said Josh Goller, board chair for the Hermiston School District. "But at the same time, waiting until the fall to get to a full day of school is not appropriate."

Federal officials in recent weeks have urged schools nationally to bring students back to the classroom, citing statistics showing it is safe to do so if health and safety guidelines, such as mask wearing and physical distancing, are consistently maintained in both



Bryce Dole/Hermiston Herald

Parents, teachers and students stand along West Highland Avenue outside of Hermiston High School with signs encouraging the full return to in-person classes on Saturday, March 13, 2021.

the school and the broader community.

Goller said he believes that, by maintaining health and safety guidelines, schools can be open on a bigger scale sooner rather than later.

"Is there potential risk involved? Perhaps," Goller said. "But a slightly-reduced physical distancing, combined with masks and cohorts that are perhaps a

little bit larger to facilitate more student movement in the building, those sorts of things" can keep schools safe.

Amy Robinson, a teacher in Umatilla who is married to Shane, said that several of her students who take care of their siblings are "failing miserably."

"We're sending kids out into the world who are missing a year to a year and a half

of school, and that's just not OK," she said.

She said some of her students struggle with mental health problems, and when hybrid classes began last week in Umatilla, it was clear that staying at home had made them more socially awkward.

Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney attended the March 13 rally and spoke with attendees.

"The reason kids show up is because of the connection with others," she said. "That's where we're hurting the most is the connection with each other, with the school, with the community."

Like many people at the rally, Mooney said that current rules, requiring students and employees to stay 6 feet apart and only have contact with small "cohorts" of people at the school, are preventing students from returning to school full time.

"At this point, if there isn't a relaxing of the guid-

ance around the square footage per-person in classrooms, and the cohort size, we can't go any further," she said. "It's really those two restrictions that are going to keep us from having our students back in classrooms."

Last week, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced in a press conference that she was ordering public schools to reopen by mid-April. That announcement, however, didn't change plans for Umatilla County school districts like Pendleton, where K-5 students had returned to hybrid schooling (part online, part in person) and plans were already in place to bring back middle and high school students soon thereafter. Most smaller districts have already brought back all grades.

Hermiston's K-5 students have already started hybrid classes, and middle schoolers and high schoolers will soon join them in the coming weeks. Mooney said the school district has imple-

mented a variety of health and safety protocols and sanitation services that will allow students to return to classes safely.

"For all of our kids, there's a limit to how you can interact on Zoom," she said. "The conversations aren't the same. The kids' interactions aren't the same. The interactions with teachers aren't the same."

With hybrid classes beginning soon, and football having started weeks ago, Elijah Robinson, Garrett's older brother, said he's enjoyed seeing his friends again and is excited to see more. However, with some school still online, he's still worried about how things will go.

"If the format's the same as online learning, it's still going to be pretty, overall, just — you're still gonna get no help after class and what not," he said. "You get to see your friends, but it's not close to what five days will be like."

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