

Mandates:

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percentage of being killed by an asteroid impact while you go about your day.

There have been no confirmed deaths from the Pfizer or Moderna shots.

With that said, VAERS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's adverse effects reporting database, had just shy of 6,500 people who have reported a death within a certain time frame of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

It is important to note, however, that these deaths are currently being investigated and could come from any number of reasons, and are not confirmed to have been caused by the vaccine. Regardless, this num-

ber makes up 0.0018% of administered doses — roughly the same odds of dying in a tornado.

"When you look at the data of who's ending up in the hospital and who's dying, the numbers are overwhelmingly the unvaccinated population," Hitzman said.

And, since no vaccine has been approved for kids 12 and under, they have no way to protect themselves, said Hitzman, except for the recommendations that have been promoted — masks, social distancing, good hygiene and vaccines for those old enough.

"Those of us in the education field, those of us in the healthcare field, we're all mandatory reporters and what that basically means is that we have an obligation to



Dr. Jon Hitzman, the public health officer for Umatilla County, speaks Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021, to a group of educators, parents and community members at a meeting with Hermiston School District officials at Armand Larive Middle School.

protect your children when they are under our care," Hitzman said.

Officials focus on keeping children in schools

Despite the frustrations and anger over the vaccine mandate, nearly everyone recognized the importance of getting kids back in school after a year of hybrid and distance learning. This sentiment was emphasized by Superintendent Mooney, who said that her main priority was getting kids in school.

"We know, without a doubt, that education was not the same last year when our students were in comprehensive distance learning," she said, adding that they would do whatever it took to safely get kids learning in person.

She said she was proud of how hard the district's employees had worked over the last 18 months and how

they've stepped up, made plans, adapted and made new plans. But, she said that even though she wasn't a fan of Gov. Brown taking away local control, she said they would enforce the new mask and vaccine mandates.

"I want to be very clear that I value our staff and all of their hard work, however, I am licensed in the state of Oregon; I am legally bound to follow the laws," she said. "That is a reality and my intent is to make sure that we keep our students in person, in school, every day. That is our goal. That is our collective commitment as a district."

"While this isn't starting how we had hoped it would," Mooney said, "I'm looking forward to having our kids face to face."

Count Pendleton Superintendent Chris Fritsch as one of the school officials unsurprised by the governor's announcement.

Considering the recent announcements from California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee that they were requiring their teachers to get the shot, Fritsch anticipated Oregon Gov. Kate Brown soon would follow. While he understood the personal feelings people may have about vaccine requirements, Fritsch said the most effective tools at limiting the spread of the virus have been vaccinations and masking.

"We need to do everything we can to keep schools open," he said.

While the district could potentially lose staff who refuse to get vaccinated, Fritsch said the district will have to deal with vacancies as they come. When Umatilla County Public Health did vaccination drives for educators in January and February, Fritsch estimated that between 75%-80% of Pendleton school staff were

given the shot, a number that may have risen since then if staff opted to get vaccinated privately.

Fritsch said Pendleton also plans to comply with the governor's mask mandate. The state had previously provided local school districts with the ability to create their own masking guidelines, and although Pendleton initially decided to make masks optional in the fall, Fritsch said he was reconsidering the decision as local cases began to surge again in the summer.

As cases and hospitalizations began to rise as the vaccination rate remained well below state average, Fritsch said he considered instituting a mask requirement at the local level, but the governor's announcement rendered those discussions moot.

— Staff Writer Antonio Sierra contributed to this feature.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney speaks during a community forum and question-and-answer session Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021, at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston. The event, held in conjunction with the Umatilla County Public Health Department, offered community members an opportunity to ask questions related to COVID-19 as it pertains to returning to school.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Youth livestock handlers return to their stalls after showing Friday, Aug. 20, 2021, at the Morrow County Fair in Heppner.

Fair:

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been under the tutelage of some pretty amazing adults that then become the next generation of producers."

She said while numbers in 4-H and FFA dropped a bit because of COVID-19 in 2020, it has seen a large increase in renewed interest lately.

"I think it's the value of the work ethic," she said, "the camaraderie amongst parents and community and the opportunity to really teach our kids where their food and fiber comes from."

Beth Dickenson, the county's FFA advisor and one of Heideman's friends from their time at OSU, spoke about how it's more important than ever to get children involved in agriculture.

"The more time that goes on, the less connection that more and more people have," Dickenson said. "And so then this becomes a novelty and a misunderstood industry. You want to eat and you want clothes, and you want lumber to build your home or your remodel, but you don't know where it comes from. And then you pass legislation and vote for legislation and it goes against all the things that you want."

"We are all in this together," Heideman said. "We all make sure kids are doing well. We are concerned about their safety and well-being. We want them to be extremely competitive but ultimately our job is to raise the next generation of Morrow County citizens. That's our job."

Heideman said there's a ton of work that goes into events such as the Morrow County Fair, 4-H and FFA programs and it wouldn't be possible without the copious number of volunteers.

"We have some amazing volunteers who are helping these kids be successful in their arena," she said, "and it's a real team effort."

Many of the volunteers are kids as well — some who showed started working in the barn as early as 5:30 a.m. and stayed until after 6 p.m. to clean up and place fresh hay down after the competitions were finished.

"It's hard," she said. "It's really hard and it's not always roses. This (the showmanship) is the roses part of it."

But livestock wasn't the only part of the Morrow County Fair this week. With a rodeo, rides, mouth-watering food and musical performances, attendees had a multitude of options to spend their day. For those lucky enough to be at the fair around 5 p.m., they had the opportunity to listen to 9-year-old Sarrafina James play hits from Metallica to Flamenco on her ukulele.

According to Justin James, her dad, she had just auditioned for "America's Got Talent" before COVID-19 struck and forced everyone indoors. Putting in two to three hours of practice a day for the last year and a half, she was able to pick up the instrument quickly and perform alongside her dad's hypnotist and comedy shows.

He said people have loved seeing Sarrafina play songs that challenge even grown adults, and she's loved the crowd so far.

"It's been an absolutely amazing fair," he said.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Sarrafina James, 9, performs on the ukulele Friday, Aug. 20, 2021, at the Morrow County Fair in Heppner.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Tile Hamilton, center, douses her opponents with water Saturday, Aug. 21, 2021, as Marv Hamilton Jr., left, and Marv Hamilton Sr. push the team to victory at Melon Fest in downtown Hermiston.

Melon:

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watermelons walk across the stage flaunting their wares. Blaine Barnes took first place with a watermelon vine costume with a watermelon on his head and a face painted red to resemble the inside of a melon. Lola, Oaklyn, Cain and Zeke Norman took second place as a family and Kaylee Rowe took home the third place prize.

Melon Fest wouldn't be complete without a seed spitting contest, and Hermistonians didn't disappoint. Fans cheered as competitors took a bite of watermelon, pursed their lips and let loose the small black seeds.

Umatilla County sheriff's deputy Darrin Parsons took first place, edging out the trio of other competitors, including his sister Nancy Walchli.

"I just wanted to beat my sister," said Parsons. "I grew up working on the (watermelon) farm."

At the opposite end of Main Street, Aaron Davis



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Aaron Davis, left, plunges into a dunk tank at the hands of his son, Griffin Davis on Saturday, Aug. 21, 2021, at Melon Fest in downtown Hermiston.

plunged into a dunk tank at the arm of his son, Griffin. Davis, a social studies teacher at Hermiston High School, volunteered for a 30-minute stint as the des-

ignated dunker.

"I've been teaching here so long I know lots of these young adults," said Davis of those lining up to dunk him. "They're very excited."